CBW

Number One
For PSV Professionals

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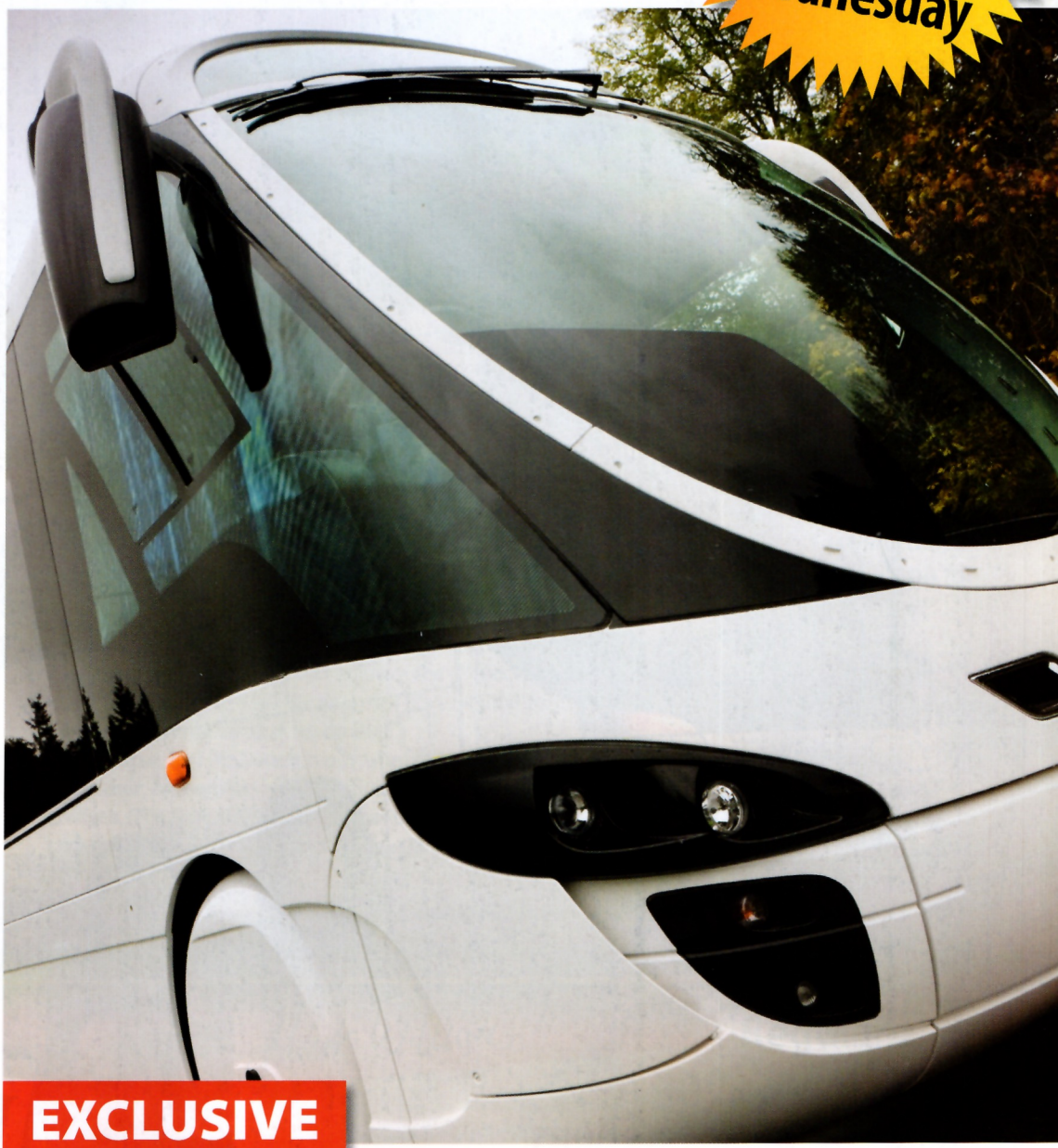

EXCLUSIVE

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Meet Andy Sutton...

I commented last week that I was concerned that there might be a little anti-coach feeling underlying the Isle of Wight's decision to double coach parking charges.

The leader of Isle of Wight Council, Andy Sutton, last month made comments in the March issue of *Island Life*, the 'county' magazine for the area, which make his colleague Ian Ward seem like a communist.

"They [coaches] put absolutely nothing into the island's economy. Nothing, apart from damaging our roads. When a coach party goes out for the day, they spend very little - in fact, almost nothing. How does this help the island?"

In the article, he announced: "We need to look at a fairer charging policy for coaches coming over, so the local community and the local authority get a bigger take from that market. We will look at increasing coach parking charges.

"We will never get rid of coaches, but we can shape the bucket and spade brigade, and turn the island's tourism on its head. We need to shape the battle ground, as I would say with my military background."

Adding my response almost seems superfluous. It's clearly "fairer" in his battle plan to price coach passengers out of the market. According to Mr Sutton, the low-life coach passengers will then be replaced by the clearly pent-up demand from cyclists and walkers, altogether a better breed of tourist in his strategy.

The problem is not just coach passengers as he sees it, but the "lower hotels" which don't achieve the 85% occupancy of the best: "We need to extend the season - it's essential for the island business community that we do this."

Of course, had Mr Sutton really wanted to get shot of coaches altogether, he had two options other than doubling the parking charges. The first was to ensure that the ferry berths cannot take coaches. The second was the one he took - to expound his classist claptrap in public.

To be fair, he does invite you to comment. Just log on to *www.iwight.com/councillor/andysutton/* to get his contact details, including mobile phone number... he's expecting your call!

Mark Williams

Mark Williams
Editor

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Irish police probe minibus crash

Rear axle and wheels 'came away' when vehicle hit bump on road

Gabriel Conway, Irish correspondent

Police investigating a fatal accident in Ireland are looking into claims that the vehicle was not licensed.

Fifteen-year-old Michael White died and 33 children were taken to hospital when the Mercedes minibus with Alexander bodywork crashed in Co. Offaly last Tuesday, April 4.

"It's a miracle that more children were not killed or seriously injured in this accident," Garda Patrick McGee told *CBW*. "The bus rolled over on to its roof and was very badly crushed. When I saw the scene I expected to deal with multiple fatalities. It was a terrible thing to come across."

Investigators have been examining the history of the vehicle, which was purchased by the operator in November last year, apparently with a certificate showing that it had passed an annual inspection the previous September. The operator, Ray McKeown of Clara, was licensed to operate a different vehicle, but did not have the accident vehicle registered as a licensed PSV.

"There is one bus registered on the licence but this is not the vehicle involved in the accident," Transport Minister Martin Cullen told the *Dail* newspaper.

"It may be a technical issue but the vehicle involved in the accident was not the vehicle registered on the operator's licence," adding that this was a matter for police to follow up.

A full investigation is now under way, and police have managed to source an identical 1989 33-seater Alexander bus after contacting *CBW* for assistance in tracking one down.

Thirty-four children were on the 33-seater at the time of the accident, when it is believed that the detachment of part of the rear wheel and axle assembly caused the bus to go out of control on the Bog Road near the town of Clara. Investigators say that a pre-existing failure of the axle mounting at one side showed rust marks which indicated that the failure had occurred some time earlier, while the mounting on the other side broke away at the time of the accident.

The bus had been hired for the school run as a private arrangement by parents whose children were outside the catchment area of Killina Presentation School, and who did not qualify for free transport.

NIALL CARSON/PA

The missing rear axle is evident in this crash scene picture

There is one bus registered on the licence but it is not the vehicle involved in the accident

The news that the crash vehicle was apparently unlicensed has lead to calls from parents and politicians for an immediate review of the current system, under which only those school services operated under the DoE free transport scheme are monitored by the Department.

The accident has also lead to calls for all buses transporting schoolchildren to be fitted with seatbelts.

Mr Cullen said: "I would absolutely agree that all children should have seatbelts available on their school bus. I would bring in legislation immediately to effect this if I could, but I understand that this may be not possible as it could conflict with EU law, and could be seen as breaching EU competition legislation.

"I will consult with the attorney general on this matter, and see what legal measures could be introduced."

Irish opposition leader Enda Kenny said: "Tragically, this accident comes less than a year after the Navan school bus accident which resulted in the deaths of five teenagers.

"Parents the length and breadth of the country will be asking themselves questions about school bus safety standards, seat-belts, passenger numbers and other obvious concerns in the aftermath of such an incident."

Mr McKeown was not available for comment as *CBW* went to press.

What do you think?

E-mail *cbwinbox@rouncymedia.co.uk*

or write to the address on page 3

Bell wades into bus war

Andrew Peace, news editor

Traffic commissioner Beverley Bell has become involved in the Manchester bus war between UK North and Stagecoach.

Manchester operator UK North has been in a battle with Stagecoach after starting services on the 192 Manchester - Stockport service last week. There are now so many buses on the service that GMPTE has become concerned for public safety, particularly at Piccadilly bus station in the city centre.

A statement from GMPTE says: "The current situation is totally unacceptable. We are doing what we can to address the problem and ensure public safety. We have increased the level of supervision in the area by parking attendants and transport officers. We are calling on the Traffic Commissioner to use her powers to resolve the situation without delay."

A statement from Mrs Bell says that she is in touch with all parties and that she is reviewing the situation on a daily basis. She says: "Should it prove necessary, Section 26(1) of the Transport Act 1985 allows a Traffic Commissioner to attach a condition to an operator's licence. That condition may prohibit that operator from using vehicles under the licence to provide a specific local service, or provide local services of any description if it appears to the Commissioner that an operator has intentionally interfered with the operation of a local service provided by another operator. This condition may also be attached if it appears that a local service has been operated in a manner dangerous to the public."

MEN SYNDICATION

Stagecoach and UK North buses vie for space at Manchester's Piccadilly bus station

A spokesman for Stagecoach told *CBW*: "There is no war from our perspective, we have operated route 192 for 10 years. They have come in and tried to cherry pick services."

David Ellis, business manager at GMBuses, the parent company of UK North said: "We are just trying to offer a good service to the people of Manchester, and so far the public are responding very well."

GMBuses runs a total of 78 buses, 29 of which are branded UK North, from its headquarters in South Manchester.

Operators join IOW boycott

More coach operators have joined a boycott of the Isle of Wight, while both the Confederation of Passenger Transport and Coach Tourism Council have joined the row about coach parking charges.

The decision by the Isle of Wight council to double the parking charges without warning, leaving drivers having to find £100 or more, got an immediate reaction from Parrys International and from Rotherham operator Brecks International (*CBW*, April 5), with both operators threatening to boycott the island.

Now they have been joined by Lincolnshire operator Radley Holidays, while Eclipse Coaches of Cambridge reported problems on a recent tour.

"Operators have noticed the change in price but have not noticed the midnight start period, which makes its worse," Tony Hall, of Eclipse, told *CBW*.

David Ogden, of David Ogden Coaches of St Helens, was among many operators at the CTC annual meeting (see pages 16-17) who raised the issue: "Shouldn't we cancel the Isle of Wight familiarisation trip planned by the CTC?" he asked at the meeting.

CTC chief executive Sean Taggart said the CTC would be drafting a letter to the *Isle of Wight Gazette* to highlight the concerns of operators.

The CPT has written to the council and chamber of commerce, saying the amount of the increase is unacceptable.

■ Are you joining the boycott? Tell us your thoughts at *cbwinbox@rouncymedia.co.uk*

Digitach requirement fixed on May 1

European legislation has determined May 1 will be the official introduction date for digital tachograph requirements and any vehicles registered on or after that date must be fitted with the new technology. The Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders said its contacts in Brussels have confirmed the information was published in the Official Journal on Tuesday, April 11 – giving time for the new statute to be taken into law.

Briefly

Richard Branson is getting into alternative fuels. The Virgin Air boss is investigating the use of bioalcohol for use in his planes, and is also establishing a Virgin Fuels company to manufacture it himself. He says: "Virgin Fuels would be a great mix for ethical and business reasons." He claims that the company will be selling bioalcohol from forecourts within five years.

Jeremy Clarkson's 11-year-old daughter says her dad is always complaining while out on the road, but never more so than when confronted with a bus. She says he thinks they are "too big, too noisy, too smelly and too empty". *The Sunday Times* interviewed the children of celebrities about their parent's driving habits.

A survey by the *Leicester Mercury* shows that 51% of local business leaders have used a bus in the past year. Comments ranged from: "The service is usually good" to: "it's so expensive and unreliable I've gone back to using the car."

A pedestrian hit by a bus in Southampton at the weekend is in a critical condition in hospital. The 36-year-old man was crossing the road when he was hit by a single-decker late on Saturday evening.

A man has been charged with the murder of a pensioner at a bus station 12 years ago. Shirley Leach was sexually assaulted and strangled in the toilets of Bury Interchange in Greater Manchester in January 1994. Ian O'Callaghan, 37, from Bury will appear before magistrates this week.

TfL's Environment Report says the organisation is making progress in its efforts to tackle pollution. Emissions of fine particles have dropped by 28% since 2003/04, down to fitting particulate traps on all buses it says.

BUSES

Wrightbus seals MAN deal

Northern Irish firm to work with German manufacturer

Andrew Peace, news editor

Wrightbus has announced its first collaboration with German manufacturer MAN.

The first 12m A22 chassis will be delivered to Wrightbus' Ballymena factory within weeks, for launch as the Wrightbus Meridian by the end of the year. The fully low floor Meridian will take the company into previously unexplored niches, namely the airport market. Multiple door and interior specifications will be available.

Wright Group's vice president of business development Mark Nodder said: "This is an important addition to our product range, bringing Wrightbus quality, passenger appeal, operational durability and in-service support to the full sized, full low floor segment at Euro IV and beyond.

"As a leading European bus chassis manufacturer within the global Neoman Group, we are delighted to be working in partnership with MAN on this project and success would certainly augur well for further future developments."

Commenting on the announcement, Vince Welsh MD of Neoman UK said: "The name of Wrightbus is synonymous with quality and I am delighted that we are able to enter into this partnership. With the full low-floor concept it will open markets for us that we have never been in before. I am looking forward to a long and successful partnership with one of the industry's most innovative bodybuilders."

The styling on the new bus will follow the current Wrightbus family look. Designer Paul Blair says the current look is still fresh, and will not be updated, apart from detail changes, for two years.

Like all vehicles in the Wright Group's range, the new Meridian will feature the patented Aluminique body structure.

Under the agreement signed between the two companies, the Euro IV EGR MAN A22 chassis will be bodied exclusively by Wrightbus for the UK and Irish market, with specifications to suit other European markets likely to follow.

An initial production batch of 20 vehicles has already been scheduled, with a further 20 units awaiting confirmation from the customer. Currently Wrights only body Volvo, Scania and VDL chassis.

Left: Mark Nodder, Wright Group
Right: Vince Welsh, Neoman UK

TWM drivers may go on strike later this month

TWM drivers ready to strike

Drivers at Travel West Midlands are poised to go on strike after nearly three quarters of them voted for industrial action last week. Meanwhile, talks between the Transport and General Workers Union and TWM management continued all last week, but both remained tight-lipped about progress.

The drivers are demanding a £20,000 a year minimum salary, a maximum eight hours driving a day and guarantees on final salary pensions.

The strike vote, held between March 17 and April 3, had a turnout of 68%. 1,803 voted in favour of strikes, with 652 against.

John Tuhey, T&G senior regional industrial organiser, says: "This vote is a very clear indication that TWM drivers want to see a significant improvement from their employer and are prepared to strike if necessary. Our members have shown a great deal of patience so far and the fact that we have not formally indicated any strike dates shows they are still showing restraint."

The BBC reported that three dates have been earmarked for strikes: April 22, April 28 and May 8.

A strike at TWM, which is the areas largest operator, carrying around 1m passengers a day on 450 routes across Birmingham, the Black Country, Solihull and Coventry would bring the region to a standstill.

The Wright stuff

Wrightbus has just opened a £500,000 dedicated aftersales training facility in its Customcare centre at its Ballymena factory. It will provide both classroom and workshop-based environments for dealer staff and technicians from bus operating companies, with the capacity to teach over 350 technicians a year.

There is also a major crash repair facility at Ballymena, and Customcare is piloting a Mobile Support Unit in Scotland, and running a parts storage depot at London General's Camberwell garage, to support the Electrocity.

A communications and e-business concept pilot will also begin this month. The system will allow individual centres to order and track parts on-line and allow Wrights to analyse trends. The concept will roll out by the end of 2006.

Left: the first trainees to use the new training facility

Electrocity gets green light

Two months after the first batch of six Wrights Electrocitys entered service in London, Wrights has announced that the model will go into full scale production.

The Electrocity is only the first step in Wrights' hybrid programme. Eventually all models will be offered with a hybrid option, including the ftr and, by the end of this year, a double-decker.

Vice president of business development Mark Nodder said: "Early in-service results are adding further credence to the belief that this kind of hybrid technology is a viable alternative to diesel, especially as the vehicles have the range of a conventional bus and can operate from existing depots."

He added: "We are already developing Electrocity technology both for longer length single deck and double deck buses in readiness for fast tracking their introduction, should in-service operating experience conclusively prove the economic case."

Initial pre-service trials at Millbrook showed that fuel economy improved by up to 40% compared to a similar sized Euro III diesel engine bus. This target is already close to being achieved in London.

Electrocitys are powered by electric batteries driving a traction motor which is supported by a generator, comprising of a 120kW electric motor, coupled with a 1.9 litre turbo diesel, common-rail Euro IV engine.

A number of operators and local authorities have expressed interest in the current Electrocity. Production slots are available now at the new, dedicated Electrocity facility at the Ballymena Headquarters.

Wright's hybrid Electrocity bus is to go into full production

Scania reports successful '05

Scania president and chief executive Leif Ostling says the firm had a strong year in 2005, setting new records for invoiced volume of both vehicles and services.

Scania's order bookings and vehicle deliveries and operating income all rose 4%, the latter returning £507.4m. Net income increased 8% to £345.1m and share earnings went up from £1.60 to £1.73 - prompting a proposed dividend of £1.11 per share - although this is unchanged from 2004.

Bus and coach deliveries during 2005 reached record highs although order bookings were unchanged, with a stronger first half and slower second half.

During the full year 2005, Scania's order bookings for buses and coaches were unchanged, amounting to 6,046 units. During the fourth quarter, order bookings amounted to 1,255 (1,491) units, a decrease of 16%.

In Europe, order bookings increased by 3% during the full year. Demand increased in the Nordic countries and Great Britain, while Russia and Spain showed lower figures. In Latin America, order bookings rose 10%.

PTA chief casts doubt on smartcards

The lead member for buses at West Midlands PTA has poured scorn on the authority's plan to introduce a £20m smartcard scheme.

The idea was expected to be nodded through at a meeting of WMPTA's scrutiny committee last week. Instead Councillor Len Clark, Conservative, recommended it should be put on hold for the foreseeable future.

He was quoted as saying: "At the moment we haven't even designed a system that meets the legal, technical and cost requirements. Until we have agreement with the operators to introduce a model that works, we ought to be cautious and not be making grand public statements that we cannot deliver on."

Briefly

East Lancashire Coachbuilders is attending the UK Coach Rally in Brighton with a 12.4m double-decker for Roadliner Coaches of Poole, specially renamed Roadlyner in traditional East Lancs style. Similar to vehicles already supplied to Weavaway Coaches and PPH of St Albans, it is based on a Volvo B9TL chassis and includes the following features: 102 MTB Buckingham fully compliant seats, three point belts, removable seats to meet Schedule Service DDA compliance, LED electronic destination, Look CCTV system, Autosound DVD system, tables, luggage racks, skylights, tinted bonded glazing and soft interior trim.

Despite rumours to the contrary, the deadline for bids for Blackburn Transport has not passed. When *CBW* called for clarification, Andy Kay, executive member for Regeneration, said: "The bidding process is still ongoing and as such it would be inappropriate to comment further at this stage." The bidding has been subject to much speculation, with many thinking the sale had actually been called off.

Regeneration work on Derby's Riverlights project, which contains the city's new bus station, is back on track following the collapse of the previous developer. A new company, Riverlights Limited, has taken over the contract. Demolition is expected to resume in the near future, with construction starting by the end of the year.

First Group will take on its 1,000th European Union driver within the next few weeks. Two years ago the company had a shortfall of almost 800 drivers. The company says the programme has been a huge success, with some workers who started as drivers now being promoted to supervisory roles.

COACHES

Beaumont of Gloucester bows out

Long-established Gloucester operator Beaumont Travel is to cease trading, its contracts and work having been placed with local operators.

Beaumont was founded 19 years ago by current managing director Mike Sadler, who told *CBW* that ill health forced him last year to take on managers to cover for him, but that the arrangement hadn't worked out. He said: "We made the decision to close before Christmas. We have given Gloucestershire County Council lengthy notice and they have been brilliant.

"We approached a number of companies, including Swanbrook, Ebleys, International Coach Company and Dukes Travel, to provide cover for our work and this has run very well."

Mr Sadler said his main concern was saving jobs, and that although there are six redundancies, four of these people have also been offered work.

"It's a very sad day for me. It came as a real shock to my staff and it was hard to have to tell them we are closing," said Mr Sadler, who named the company Beaumont after the road he lives in.

The leasehold premises in Quedgeley are being returned to the owners, while the garage equipment and 19 of the 30 vehicles are up for sale.

Crash driver faces manslaughter charge

A driver caught up in the Cologne coach crash in which three people including a coach driver died is being charged by German police with manslaughter.

Brian Marjoram, who works for Ambassador Travel of Great Yarmouth, learned about the charges last week, though his police liaison officer said it had come 'like a bolt from the blue'. "He has not spoken to German police. From the time of the accident to now he has not spoken to anyone about it," PC Sidney Webster told a local newspaper.

The accident, in February (*CBW*, February 16), started after a coach with a flat tyre which had pulled up on the side of the motorway, near Cologne, was hit by a truck.

A spokesman for the German public prosecutor's office said: "After the crash between the lorry and the first coach, a car driver passed the accident and managed to avoid it. As the coach driver was higher up than the car driver he had the possibility to see the crash and avoid it."

A 14-year-old boy, a school secretary and Ron Lees, a co-driver for Ambassador Travel, died in the incident.

Vehicles such as the Enviro400 have helped Alexander Dennis's registrations

March registrations jump 37.4%

March registration figures show strong growth, boosting industry expectations of a stable result for the year as whole, according to Christopher Macgowan, SMMT chief executive.

He said: "2006 opened with modest year-on-year growth in the bus sector, but March saw the pace increase, although with no real change in the underlying trends in the sector. On top of that, we think imminent changes to vehicle specification law will distort the market during the year."

The rolling year total was 13,021 units, up 6.8%. Bus and coach registrations are stable over 12,000 for the rolling year and with March bus and coach registrations up 37.4% this trend should continue.

Light minibus registrations, under 3.5tonnes, have picked up well over the last three and six months; up 19.6% and 8.8% respectively. This is reflected in the rolling year total which has grown in recent months.

Double-deck bus registrations increased 7.1% and 19.1% for the previous three and six months totals. The rolling year total for double-deck buses was down 9.4% to 958 units.

Rolling year coach registrations were at 1,061 in March, down 6.3% on the same period last year. The rolling year totals for coaches 3.5 to 16t, and coaches above 16t, were down 11.5% and 4.8% respectively.

COACH AND BUS

Manufacturer	Mar 06	Mar 05	YTD 06	YTD 05
Volvo	192	176	315	410
Alexander Dennis	172	41	258	152
Scania	57	45	120	111
Optare	39	57	104	117
Irisbus	38	33	68	97
MAN	18	7	65	16
VDL Bus	24	16	50	33
Mercedes-Benz	16	13	43	19
BMC	13	18	38	35
Bova	23	13	28	18
Van Hool	7	2	7	2
DAF Bus	1	1	1	1
Other British	2	0	3	0
Other Imports	30	32	48	65
Total	633	459	1159	1085

BUS

Manufacturer	Mar 06	Mar 05	YTD 06	YTD 05
Alexander Dennis	171	35	254	146
VolvoBus	102	58	188	246
Optare	39	57	104	117
Scania	35	35	58	75
VDL Bus	21	11	58	28
MAN	11	1	56	8
Irisbus	27	17	42	52
Mercedes-Benz	12	7	35	10
BMC	11	8	34	25
Autosan	9	0	9	0
Others	1	2	5	2
Total	442	236	847	717

COACH

Manufacturer	Mar 06	Mar 05	YTD 06	YTD 05
VolvoBus	90	118	127	165
Scania	11	10	62	36
Bova	23	13	28	18
Setra	14	12	26	20
Irisbus	11	16	26	45
Mercedes-Benz	9	9	14	12
MAN	7	6	9	8
VDL Bus	3	5	3	5
BMC	2	10	4	10
Alexander Dennis	2	6	4	6
Caetano Toyota	0	5	1	16
DAF Bus	0	1	0	1
Others	1	10	1	24
Total	191	223	312	368

Scotline to operate unique Magiq

This tri-axle Bova Magiq delivered to Austin Coach Travel for sister company Scotline Tours is the first in the UK.

The 52-seater was built as a 25th anniversary special edition, celebrating the collaboration between Bova and UK distributor Moseley PCV.

It features leather upholstery, Alcoa aluminium wheels, a built-in vacuum cleaner and wooden inlays in the furniture and dashboard.

The coach has a special mother of pearl lacquer, and a colour-coded ski box.

It will be on tour duties in Scotland alongside fellow Austin Coach Travel subsidiary Capital Coaches.

The tri-axle Magiq is the first in the UK

Hookways buys Classic

Hookways has bought Paignton-based Classic Tours, and taken on its management and staff.

The Exeter company - whose founder Charlie Hookway died in late 2004 - gets Classic's tour and excursion programme, takes on its shop and one of its two vehicles. Classic will now source vehicles from the Exeter HQ for its tours.

Former Classic sole proprietor Brian Knowles will now use his expertise within the Hookways portfolio, continuing to market in South Devon as Classic Tours: "Running coaches as well as tours and excursions is really hard work and I can more or less push myself on tours and excursions. That's what I like doing," he said.

Classic shared a yard in Paignton, which Hookways general manager Alastair Gray says may still be useful. The booking office will stay, selling to Paignton's summer visitors.

"We now have a larger catchment," said Mr Gray, whose company also has Dorset Queen in Dorset.

Scania and MAN split

A two-year co-operation agreement over axles between Scania and MAN has been rescinded.

The manufacturers established the agreement in April 2003 – to jointly develop axles and gearboxes. Both parties have been evaluating development and production of axles by MAN in Germany and gearboxes produced by Scania in Sweden.

Scania's president and chief executive, Leif Ostling, said: "After several years of technical evaluations, our conclusion is that the financial benefits of the intended co-operation within axles are not sufficient to justify the technical complexity and related extra costs that will be added to our products."

Discussions over gearboxes have entered the final stage. A possible outcome could be that Scania becomes a supplier to MAN of certain types of gearboxes meeting MAN's technical specification.

Fraser Eagle's coaching division has got two Bova Magiqs to add to the three Scania Van Hool T9s delivered last month. The 49-seat Bovas are destined for a variety of work including private hire and UK and European touring. They join not only the Van Hools but two Neoplan Starliners brought in as transport for Burnley Football Club, Oldham Athletic and Accrington Stanley. MD Howard Tyrer is shown with the two vehicles.

Touros follow Tourino

Redwing has replaced its 2003 intake with no fewer than 10 Mercedes-Benz Touros. Two of the coaches are 53-seaters in white, red and yellow Cosmos livery for its extensive London tour work with the inbound operator. The remainder are 49-seaters in Redwing's usual red and cream colours. Redwing exhibited its new 33-seat Tourino at the British Travel Trade Fair in March

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Briefly

More bus lanes will be built in Eastbourne, the result of a Quality Bus Partnership signed between East Sussex County Council, Eastbourne Borough Council and Eastbourne Buses. For its part, Eastbourne Buses has agreed to run more lowfloor buses and invest increased profits in higher frequency services. The last proposed bus lane in the town met with massive local opposition but was eventually given the go ahead.

Drivers at First Group in Orpington, Kent, have published a collection of their short stories, called 'First Attempts'. An initial print run of 50 copies will be increased to 150 to cope with demand from local libraries and colleges. The project was started in September in a learning room at the garage and aimed to get staff involved in creative writing.

An inquest in Belfast has heard about the death of an elderly woman who was hit by a bus. Christina Campbell, 85, was crossing the road in the city centre with her husband when she was hit by the bus and fell underneath the wheels. The driver said he simply had not seen her, backed up by a witness who saw the accident from his car.

The Manchester Metrolink extension to Oldham is back on the agenda. The £1bn project was shelved two years ago over concerns with spiralling costs. Then Tony Blair resurrected hopes that the project would be completed after he pledged £570m for the project last year. A DfT spokesperson says talks about the extension are "going on now." A decision is expected after the local government elections in May.

Plaxton says its Anston sales centre open weekend was a huge success, resulting in 11 sales and more still under discussion. Three new coaches were sold – two Cheetahs and a Profile.

Research boss lands top Go North East job

In a shock move, Peter Huntley, chairman of transport industry research company TAS Partnership, has been appointed managing director of Go Ahead Group's Go North East subsidiary.

Go North East recently announced the closure of its Bishop Auckland depot, sparking rumours of a downturn in business. The bus market in the area has been in decline for some time due to rising car ownership and changing population distribution. The company recognises that turning the situation around is a challenge, and decided on the unorthodox choice of Mr Huntley as a 'thinking out of the box' solution.

Mr Huntley was not available for comment, but TAS managing director, Adrian Grant, says: "A unique feature of TAS is the extent that our staff are personally prepared to work for real change through practical action. Peter has been consistent in his publicly stated views on how delivering high-quality bus services can simultaneously deliver profitability and environmental and social objectives. He is now taking the opportunity to demonstrate his approach on the ground."

Mr Huntley will take up the position on 24 April and relinquish all executive responsibilities within TAS on that date.

Previous managing director Paul Matthews leaves the company with immediate effect after 10 years in the position. A short statement from Go Ahead says: "Paul has been with the company for many years and Go-Ahead wish Paul well for the future and would like to pay tribute to his work at Go North East."

■ Ian Butcher, group finance director for The Go-Ahead Group, has been named FD of the Year at the CBI & *Real Finance* magazine's 'FD Excellence Awards' in London at the weekend.

Chris Moyes, Go-Ahead's chief executive, says: "Ian's energy and drive help to keep the group moving forward and has resulted in it becoming a leading company in its sector. This award is a well deserved recognition of Ian's skills."

As well as FD of the Year within the FTSE250 sector, Mr Butcher also scooped the "First Among Equals" award for the overall UK FD of the Year. The award was in recognition of improved profit margins and return on capital employed over the past three years.

Ian Butcher: FD of the Year

Arriva Scotland West was forced to operate services in graffiti-daubed buses last Friday after vandals broke into its Inchinnan depot. Over 30 buses were defaced, although the company says they were all repainted within 48 hours. Ian Craig, director and general manager for Arriva Scotland West, said: "We take great pride in our appearance, however due to this mindless behaviour we were left with no alternative."

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Regional News

CBW takes a look at the big issues where you live in our round-up of the regions. If you've got a local issue you would like us to cover, contact Andrew Peace at *andrew.peace@rouncymedia.co.uk*

SCOTLAND

Lothian Buses and Edinburgh Council are arguing over the issue of concessionary travel for mature students. The council has agreed to examine the issue, but says it is a commercial decision, while Lothian says it is a political one, with an annual cost of £1.7m. Students aged over 25 are not allowed the passes. Edinburgh has 25,000 mature students, and is the only Scottish city not to offer the concession.

■ Meanwhile, transport chiefs in Edinburgh have reportedly shrunk back from the findings of a report into whether residents of certain areas of the city should be served by Lothian, the municipal-owned operator. Councillors ruled against Lothian extending routes, saying it would be seen as "commercial aggression" against incumbent operator **First Group**, and could spark a bus war. Locals pay £1.90 to get to the city centre, as against a £1 Lothian flat fare - but the council found that First's fares were in line with others around the country and that it was not "profiteering".

REP. IRELAND

The introduction of new penalty points affecting PSV drivers is causing inconvienience for passengers, with elderly and recovering hospital patients who use bus and coach services to Tralee no longer guaranteed a stop outside Kerry General Hospital, according to local **Bus Éireann** employees.

For more than a decade, drivers have facilitated passengers attending Kerry General Hospital by stopping outside the hospital, even though it was not a designated stop.

However, the construction of a new hospital building close to the main road and new road markings has caused some bus drivers to become concerned about safely dropping off passengers. In addition to this, following the introduction this week of over 30 new penalty points for road traffic offences, drivers are no longer happy to stop on a hatched area of the road (an area marked by yellow lines close to the roundabout), which is designed to keep order on traffic lanes.

Now drivers are calling on the appropriate authorities to designate a proper and safe drop-off area. Bus Éireann already uses a designated pick-up area on the side of the road opposite the hospital.

NORTH

Police are still appealing for witnesses to a horrifying attack on a bus driver in Manchester last month. A male passenger punched the driver in the face, breaking his cheekbone and eye socket, after his out-of-date bus pass and £20 note were refused. The driver eventually managed to remove the man from the vehicle. He also sustained other injuries to his head and legs and is still receiving treatment to his eye. The incident happened on the 111 bus, at Portland Street in Manchester City Centre on March 10.

■ Passenger power in Manchester has rescued a popular commuter bus service. Despite its popularity, **JP Travel** says service 131 from Boarshaw - Manchester city centre was not making any money. The group of passengers using the service had become close after using the service together for years and reportedly celebrated important events with parties on board, and went on holiday together.

Now the **Bluebird** bus company has agreed to take over the route after passenger complaints attracted the attention of the local newspaper, the *Middleton Guardian*. Bluebird ops manager Nick Painter told the paper that his company had always liked the service, and said: "So when GMPTE asked us if we would take on the service we thought well, we've got a spare bus, we can do it. We're also looking at increasing the frequency of the buses all day in the future, if there was a need for us to do so."

■ Meanwhile passengers in Barnsley have not been so lucky. More than 350 signed a petition sent to **South Yorkshire PTE** demanding a service from Kexborough to Mapplewell. A doctor's surgery in Kexborough closed at Christmas. The lack of a bus service to the nearest surgery in Mapplewell leaves many residents cut off from health care. SYPTE says local operators will not change their routes and it is powerless to act because all the runs in the area are run commercially. It says its bus service development team was examining the case but that, "the executive's budget for funding services is fully committed, although I am sure this request will be retained for use during any further discussion which takes place regarding routes in the area."

Frank Field MP opens First Group's new Birkenhead facility

■ Frank Field MP opened **First Group's** 40th Workplace Learning Facility in Birkenhead last week. The new centre is the latest in a UK-wide programme of learning facilities that have been jointly developed by First and the TGWU, and backed by the TUC.

The scheme started in Essex in 2002 when the local depot manager encountered difficulty motivating and retaining staff. He established an in-house training centre and actively sought the support of the TGWU and educational and training agencies. It was a great success, and the Essex experience became the model for the national programme.

The new Birkenhead facility is located within the depot buildings and First and the TGWU have invested £8,000 in classroom and IT equipment.

Lifelong Learning Centres are also being used by company driving schools to deliver hazard perception training.

■ Cumbria County Council has agreed

Briefly

■ Centro is under pressure to remove a bus shelter that has become a focus for anti-social behaviour in a part of Kidderminster. Drug users and vandals have been gathering at the stop during the cold weather, causing a nuisance to locals, who want the shelter removed but the stop itself kept. Community support officers now patrol the area. Centro says the matter will discussed in July.

■ A new trial free rural bus service, funded by the Welsh Assembly, kicked off in north Wales last week. The Traws Cambria buses, running between Aberystwyth, Cardigan, New Quay and Carmarthen were free until last Saturday.

Briefly

Over 6,500 pensioners – out of a total of 19,500 – have applied for concessionary passes in Hertsmere, Hertfordshire. Last year, when pensioners were asked to contribute £133 a year for their pass, the number taking up the offer was 5,530. The new pass enables free travel for any journey starting and ending in the region.

The redeveloped bus station in Newport, IoW, has been sold for £14m before it has even been completed. Developers Halladale have sold the site to Insight, part of HBoS, (Halifax and Bank of Scotland). Insight will assume ownership in the summer after phase one is completed.

The old Thamesdown Bus Station in Swindon is being demolished this week, to make way for a new town centre development.

The first look at the vision for Manchester's Shudehill Interchange

to start subsidising services in Kendal after **Stagecoach's** announcement last year that it could no longer run commercial services in the town. A revised timetable, featuring more cross town services and better coordination with rail services, has now gone into operation following consultation with residents.

■ Official pictures of the new **Shudehill Interchange** in Manchester have been released by Ian Simpson Architects, who developed the site, one of the targets in the IRA's 1996 bomb attack. The £28m hyper modern building combines a glass-fronted multi-story car park with a bus and Metrolink station. The bus part, managed by GMPTE, has 17 stops, layover for another 6 buses, three retail units and a travelshop.

EAST

Concessionary Travel pass holders in South Kesteven, Lincolnshire, are the only ones in the county not to have access to the countywide free scheme. Using the pass, travel from Sleaford to Grantham is free, but not the other way around. The district council says it has other spending priorities and that the anomaly will be solved by the national scheme, in 2008.

■ The rash of attacks on bus drivers has also affected Norwich, where a driver was punched, spat on and abused by a man accompanied by a woman and three children.

LONDON

The Prime Minister has granted **TfL** the power to apply for Anti Social Behaviour Orders. TfL's director of Transport Policing and Enforcement, Jeroen Weimar, said: "This new power will free up valuable police resources and enable TfL to take action on those who repeatedly engage in low level disorder, that small minority of individuals who repeatedly act in a way that is detrimental to the network, staff and customers." The British Transport Police currently applies for ASBOs on TfL's behalf. 180 have been granted on the transport network since 2002.

SOUTH EAST

Competition in Eastbourne has led to a row in the local paper between the bosses of **Eastbourne Buses** and the newly formed **The Lighthouse Line**.

The Lighthouse Line is a subsidiary of **Cavendish Motors**, whose managing director is David Howard, former managing director of Eastbourne Buses and government director for Transport on the Isle of Man. Mr Howard apparently prematurely announced the death of one of his rival's services last week.

Steve Barnett, boss of Eastbourne Buses hit back, saying: "I was a bit disappointed with what David told the *Herald* about us not running from Langney to the hospital," before pointing out that there was a service still running. "It is statements like that that don't really help," he continued. "If David wants to contribute, his company could run in an area where there isn't a bus service at the moment.

"His service, although it is not carrying many passengers at the moment, will inevitably cream passengers away from us. Any profits from those passengers that we lose will mean a service somewhere in the borough will be threatened."

■ A bus driver in Somerset has also been assaulted by a passenger after being asked to leave the vehicle for having an invalid pass. The incident happened late last Tuesday in Devonshire Road, Weston-super-Mare. The driver sustained a cut to the head.

Roadworks

■ **M74 Hamilton**
Until May 12: Contraflow and roadworks on M74 both ways at J5 A725 (Raith Interchange).

■ **M8 Renfrewshire**
Until May 10: Delays and slip road closed westbound at J27 A741 (Arkleston).

■ **M9 Linlithgow**
Until April 17: One lane closed both ways between J3 A803 (Linlithgow) and J4 A801 (Lathallan).

■ **M90 Fife**
Until May 1: Narrow lanes southbound at J1 A921 / A985 (Admiralty).

■ **M56 Cheshire**
Until April 30: Lane closed on exit slip road westbound at J7 A556 (Bowdon).

■ **M1 Hertfordshire**
Until December 31, 2008: Speed restriction of 40 mph and narrow lanes both ways between J6A M25 and J10 M1 (Luton Airport).

■ **M11 Cambridgeshire**
Until May 1: Speed restriction of 40mph both ways between J9 A11 (Newmarket Turnoff) and J8 A120 / A1250 / B1256 (Stansted Airport / Bishops Stortford).

■ **M4 Wiltshire**
Between 0900 and 0600 Monday-Friday until April 30: Lane closed on exit slip road both ways at J15 A419 (Swindon East).

■ **M4 South Gloucestershire**
Between 2100 and 0530 until April 27: Roadworks at night and barrier repairs both ways at J20 M5 (Almondsbury Interchange/M5).

■ **M48 South Gloucestershire**
Between 0930 and 1600 until April 30: Lane closed and speed restriction 40 mph both ways at J1 A403 / B4461 (Aust).

■ **M5 North Somerset**
Until July 31: Speed restriction both ways between J19 A369 (Portishead) and J20 B3133 (Clevedon).

■ **A39 Somerset**
Until May 21: Road closed both ways between B3135 and A37.

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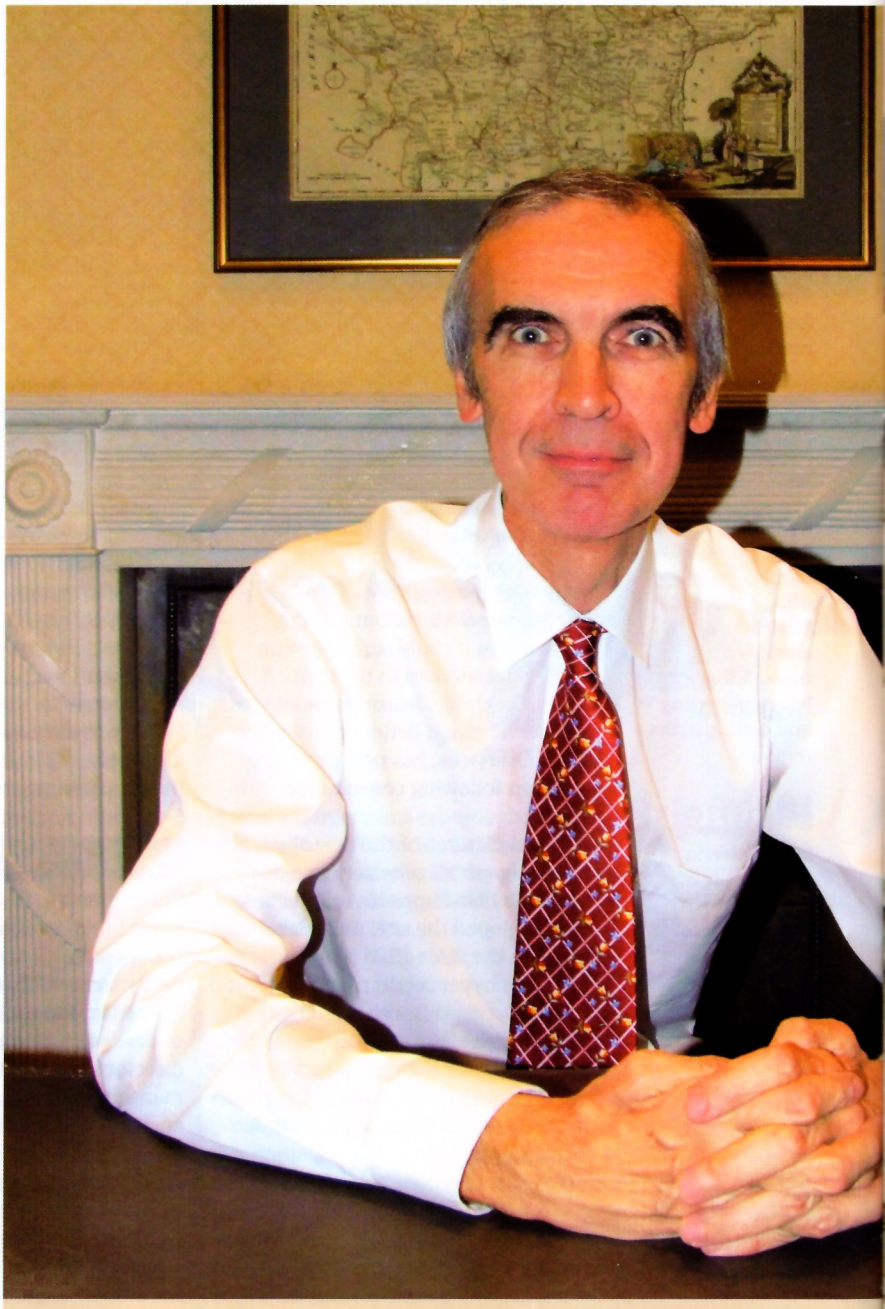
Connex reborn

Connex, the disgraced rail and bus operator, is back... as coach and bus operator Veolia Transport UK. *CBW*'s Andrew Peace meets the man heading up the rejuvenated company, hears what went wrong, and how he is going to put it right.



Tell people you are going to meet the chairman of Veolia Transport UK and you get blank looks. Tell them you are going to meet the chairman of Connex - because this is in effect what John O'Brien is - and you get universal, "oh, rights". Everybody has heard of the company, and most of them are aware of the clouds hanging over its reputation.

Connex withdrew from the UK market in 2003 after a disastrous occupation of the Network South East rail franchise which saw them being ignominiously fired. Shortly afterwards it sold its London bus business and retreated to lick its wounds, but never even considered not coming back.

That time is now - or more accurately last October when Veolia bought Bebb Travel, the coach and bus operator in South Wales. Veolia was deliberately low-key about this acquisition, an option not open to it when making its recent bid for the quoted Dunn-Line. Stockmarket rules on disclosure of information mean deals with quoted companies are necessarily more public affairs, and this acquisition has thrust Connex/Veolia back into the limelight.

Consequently, O'Brien faces the task of having to rake over Connex's troubled past, but also gets the opportunity to explain what his company is doing at the moment.

Put simply, O'Brien has to convince a cynical industry that his company is capable of running quality public transport services. He says: "It is only in the UK that the Connex name has a poor reputation. Everywhere else in the world, Connex is seen as a byword for quality. It is my job to re-establish ourselves with stakeholders in the UK as a group that knows how to run quality services."

His strategy is to buy established operators who already have good reputations, and build them up into a group. The businesses will be run separately in the short term, although the Veolia brand may be pushed to the fore over time. The deal with Bebb is now completed, and the deal with Dunn-Line is proceeding smoothly. There are a few similar deals in the pipeline, although he does not want to reveal details. His company is certainly in the market to acquire the above average operator. So how does he identify a target?

"In two respects," he says. "How they seem externally and internally. Bebb is a good example - we measured them on a range of criteria, and Bebb came near the top on every one.

"They are focused on delivering what they are doing, they are obviously expert, and it comes out in the way they treat

John O'Brien

John O'Brien lives in Hertfordshire, and commutes to his office in London each day by train and then, quite often he says, by bus.

Veolia Transport is based in Waterloo, but is in the process of moving to share a building with Veolia Water in St James's Park. O'Brien is also a non-executive director of Southern Water, one of Veolia Environnement's interests.

We meet in the new office, a short walk from the Houses of Parliament, although he says he spends "relatively little time with the DfT." That is ironic given that one of the reasons Connex hired him in the first place was because of his experience of government, and doubly ironic since the government hired him in the first place because of his commercial experience.

He was director of Granada's international rental business when, in the early 1990s he decided to change direction. The rules on radio broadcasting had changed, so he joined a group who applied, initially unsuccessfully, for a licence to broadcast a Christian radio station in London (He is also involved with the restoration of St Martin-in-the-fields church on Trafalgar Square). After the station went on air, as Premier, in 1995, he was approached about the job of privatising the railways.

He was chief operating officer of OPRAF, the Office for Passenger Rail Franchising, for only a short time before being made franchising director. He joined Railtrack in 1999 as director of property, then was made commercial director, but left in 2002 when Network Rail took over.

He was headhunted

for the job of chairman of Connex UK, and had been in the job for only three days when, on June 26 2003, at what he and his colleagues thought was a routine meeting with the Strategic Rail Authority (SRA), he was told that Connex was having its franchise terminated.

From there, he set about managing a dignified withdrawal from the rail franchise and the rest of Connex's businesses in the UK. Since then, February 2004, he has been part of a Veolia international committee that overseas its global operations, but also planning Veolia's return to the UK.

each other as well."

Quite what Veolia's long term aspirations are in the UK remains a subject of intense speculation. O'Brien makes no bones that Veolia wants to get back into rail, and Veolia Transport UK has the stated ambition to become a significant operator of transport services in the UK.

Why spend the time and go to the - ludicrous - expense of bidding for rail franchises, the first few of which you might reasonably expect to lose, when you can avoid all that and just buy a company that already holds them?

Stagecoach, Arriva and Go-Ahead have all been noted for being take-over targets in the last year. If anybody has the ability to swallow whole any - or possibly all - of the big players in the UK transport market it is the €18bn Veolia - its Veolia Transport subsidiary turned over £4.4bn last year.

Wherever you go in the recent history of Connex/Veolia, one name is never far behind: National Express. By accident, affinity or design, these two names keep cropping up in connection with each other.

When Connex sold its London bus operation after deciding to make a complete withdrawal in February 2004, the buyer was National Express. And, in the reverse situation in the same year, Connex took over train and tram operations in Melbourne from NatEx Group. Last year, the rebranded Veolia Transport bought National Express' North American public transit operations in a £53m deal.

> **It is only in the UK that the Connex name has a poor reputation. Everywhere else in the world, Connex is seen as a byword for quality**

The latest connection is indirect, but noteworthy. The thing that Bebb Travel, a 45-vehicle operator in South Wales, and Dunn-Line, Nottinghamshire-based with 200 vehicles, have in common, is NatEx contracts.

I am sure you can see where I am going when I point out that VTUK now has insider knowledge of how National Express' coaching arm runs its business - interestingly, coaching is a sector that Connex has never operated in - and, through its acquisition of Dunn-Line, experience of buying a publicly quoted company.

I do not have to put all of this to O'Brien before he says: "It would make a great story, but it wouldn't be right. We didn't identify Bebb because it was a key supplier and would have given us an inside look at National Express' business, so we could then make a bid."

So it is all too good to be true. O'Brien says the thing Bebb and Dunn Line really have in common is contracted work, "repeatable income". He says he is not interested in the touring side of the coaching industry because the volume is uncertain, but bus companies running a good proportion of contracted services are definitely on the menu.

O'Brien is also open about Veolia applying for the recent South Yorkshire quality contract scheme. "It was a very interesting thing to respond to," he says. "Just the sort of thing we are already doing all around the world." Exactly like its French-owned rival Transdev, Veolia will pitch at quality contract schemes as private companies with a lot of experience in providing contracted services to local authorities.

What really happened at Connex?

Connex had taken a bashing in the tabloid press for the operation of its South Eastern rail franchise, but the SRA alleged "financial mismanagement" when it terminated the contract in June 2003.

That is a pretty big allegation to throw at a multi-national corporation, and indeed the National Audit Office report into the affair last year found no evidence of impropriety, calling the decision to strip the franchise, "finely balanced".

The SRA had concerns about the awarding of tenders, and non-invoiced payments, to other Connex subsidiaries but, says O'Brien, there was never anything suspicious about these transactions, they were one of hundreds of examples of bad luck or poor communication that earned Connex an undeserved reputation. For instance, he says: "The money paid to the training company (which was also a Connex subsidiary) without an invoice was because the accounts manager had just died. The services had been rendered, and an invoice was eventually raised. The timing was just terribly unfortunate."

Connex has never really been given a single, defining reason why it lost its franchise, but O'Brien puts it down to a lack of understanding on the part of French executives to the subtleties of the English language. They thought they were in constructive negotiation over the level of subsidy, when in fact they were on a final warning.

The Veolia Transport UK team is entirely English. It recently announced the appointment of Steve McAleavy as chief operating officer. McAleavy was previously managing director of London bus operator Metroline, subsidiary of the largest transport operator in the world, Singaporean ComfortDelGro, and an experienced bus and coach manager.

Connex is returning, but under a new name

Who is Veolia?

Veolia is a massive French corporation, Veolia Environnement, with interests in water, waste, transport and energy. It used to be part of the Vivendi group. Transport is the smallest part, but is still the second largest operator of public transport in the world, generating £4.4bn per year in turnover. It operates in 25 countries, carries 2m passengers a day and employs over 70,000 people.

CTC SPECIAL

CTC – poised for massive campaign

The Coach Tourism Council is readying itself for a very busy year. Mark Williams reports

The Coach Tourism Council is financially fit and about to embark on its biggest public relations campaign ever, says chairman Sean Taggart.

At the annual meeting of the CTC, members heard that the CTC has dramatically reduced administration costs and returned the balance to the 'fighting fund' which will enable it to promote tourism by coach to the Press and public.

"2004 was not a good year for us with a substantial dip in finances, but we are now back into surplus," said Mr Taggart. "The money you entrust to us is now spent on what we are meant to do - promoting coach tourism."

Mr Taggart said that in the next two months, all members will be surveyed to ensure the direction the campaign goes is the right one: "But we have an action plan set out with clear objectives for the level of PR we want to achieve and the additional membership we need."

Mr Taggart said the CTC website, which had been relaunched, had proven a turning point: "It's the way the press wants to find information but I should remind members that it's their responsibility to maintain their online details."

Members were told about a coach trip to Paris which attracted journalists from the *Daily Star*, *Daily Mail* group website, Mirror Group, *Sun* and a number of regional newspapers with a combined circulation of 2.5 million readers.

"We have now built in a budget for organising press trips of this kind, and we're organising more," said chief executive Chris Wales. Based on the best-selling Da Vinci Code book, the Paris tour visited the popular attractions mentioned, and Mr Wales said was very well received by the Press.

"80% of our effort should be spent promoting tourism by coach, and 20% on the rest. The reverse was true at one time."

At the annual meeting, six new board members were elected, half of whom are coach operators.

Sean Taggart

THE NEW CTC BOARD

Elected/re-elected at AGM

John White, Ellen Smith
David Leathem, Ulsterbus Tours
Chris Roberts, Diamond Holidays
Sean Taggart, Albatross Travel Group
Pat Williams, SeaFrance
Nuria Vinuesa, Best Western Hotels

Standing board members

Damon Trigger, Port of Dover
David Ogden, David Ogden Coaches
Dermot Hogan, Tourism Ireland
Jane Duffelen, Shaws Coaches
Joanna Ames, Buzzlines
Michael Stevens, Accor Hotel Group
Mark Williams, CBW

Tour margin scheme could be replaced – by something worse

The executive director of the European Tours Operators' Association, Tom Jenkins, warned operators that in trying to iron out problems with the Tour Operator's Margin Scheme (TOMS), Europe may produce a more unwieldy system.

"What's wrong with TOMS?" asked Mr Jenkins. "Well, it was introduced in 1977 as a simplifying measure to collect VAT but it now creates disparities within European tour operation."

Mr Jenkins said tour operators into Europe are now getting around paying TOMS by registering outside of the EU, with the result that they enjoy a 10% additional margin of unpayable tax: "It creates a huge disparity between EU and non-EU. You are 10% less competitive if you are using TOMS.

Tom Jenkins, ETOA

"The Germans are furious with people now buying their holidays in Switzerland to avoid VAT. You only have to look at the names on coaches carrying inbound into mainland Europe to see that none belong to EU countries - they are all registered elsewhere."

ETOA, said Mr Jenkins, proposed taxing consumers at the rate prevalent in their country of residence, but that Europe is now

Combined event was a 'first'

For the first time, the Coach Tourism Council and Bonded Coach Holidays joined forces for an annual conference.

Based at Llandudno's Imperial Hotel, the event attracted more than 130 operators and suppliers with a programme which included an afternoon seminar, business workshop, familiarisation visits and networking dinners.

It was supported by Wales Tourism, Tourism Partnership North Wales, Conwy Borough Council, Best Western Hotels, Distinctive Systems, Tourism Ireland, Towergate Partnership, Hilton Hotels and Aaron and Partners Solicitors.

Package travel regs may be revamped

The phenomenal growth in consumer self-packaged holidays - often put together on the internet - has left 40% of holidaymakers exposed to company failure.

ETOA's executive director Tom Jenkins told delegates that governments across Europe now feel that the Package Travel Directive, brought into force in the late 1980s, is failing consumers and warned that Europe is now looking at ways to cover all consumers for travel, regardless of whether they bought a packaged deal or not.

Under current arrangements, packaged travel and accommodation carries the guarantee of a 'bonding' arrangement to cover the holiday cost and a repatriation scheme to get consumers home. But it doesn't apply where consumers have bought low-cost flights and hotel beds on-line.

"Never underestimate the crude gormlessness of government," he said. "In truth they will only do something when there's the equivalent of a dot.com crash, and I suggest we won't discover the results of their thinking until 2009 at the earliest.

"ETOA argues that we want deregulation if the regulations are defunct. The travel industry can't be both badly regulated and healthy at the same time."

Mr Jenkins said the European drive for sustainable tourism is "futile." He said that most unsustainable tourism in Europe is already illegal: "Corruption and poverty are the evils to tackle before we start talking about sustainable tourism," he said.

As another campaign, ETOA is trying to get the EU to recognise tour managers as self-employed so they do not fall within the remit of 'mobile workers' in the terms of the Working Time Directive. Mr Jenkins said many would not be able to do their job if stuck with a 48-hour week, as much of their time is spent 'on call' in case problems occur.

CTC members flocked to Llandudno to hear 2006's mission statement

proposing to amend Article 9 - the TOMS regulation - and apply VAT at the rate of every country visited proportionately to each: "It will be a nightmare. They propose to bring all the business to a one-stop shop but you would have to fill in all the VAT paid on a European tour country by country."

Mr Jenkins said the EU is also expecting to end the opt-out for tour wholesalers.

Don't get snared by brochuring

A travel law professor warned operators that giving a fair description of your coach and whether holidays are subject to achieving minimum numbers are a legal requirement.

Professor David Grant, director of the Travel Law Centre at Northumbria University, said operators should make absolutely clear any add-ons to the price such as optional tours and taxes, and have to honour published prices even if they have subsequently had to be increased.

Common pitfalls of describing holidays, he said, included giving unfair price comparisons with other tour operators, not explaining that the lead-in price is for a shared room, and not describing the method of travel.

"Your brochures have got to have the 'characteristics' of the transport being used – for example, air conditioning – and you have to put in the hotel classification. You have also got to say whether there are conditions for a minimum number of people to travel," he told delegates.

Events

April 22-23: UK Coach Rally, Brighton, 01753 631170

April 24-26: CPT Scotland Annual Conference, Gleneagles. Gail Hume 0131 272 2150, email: *gailhume@cpt-uk.freeserve.co.uk*

April 25/27: CV Show, NEC, Birmingham. *www.cvshow.com*

May 4: Employee Motivation and Incentives, conference, CBI Conference Centre, London. *www.symposium-events.co.uk*

May 8-10: ALBUM Conference, Cardiff. Karen Stafford-Smith 029 2078 7700.

May 9-13: Motortec automotive show, IFEMA, Madrid, Spain. *www.motorteconline.com*, +34 91 722 3000

May 11: DDA 2005 and Public Transport: Myth and Reality, conference, Sadlers Wells, London. Book online at *www.thewaterfront.co.uk*

May 17-18: Coach Tourism 2006, Stoneleigh Park, Warwickshire. *www.coachtourism.com*, 0870 3892903

May 21-28: CPT Study Tour, Singapore/Kuala Lumpur. Details: 0207 240 3131

June 15: Unintended Accelerations Accidents Seminar, Whitehouse Hotel, Kegworth, Derbyshire. Reducing 'bus surge' incidents. Call 0115 937 6868, or email *dean.southall@btconnect.com*

September 9-10: 40th Anniversary Bus Driver of the Year, Blackpool. 0161 427 5986. *www.bdoy.co.uk*

September 28-29: Group Leisure and Travel Show, NEC, Birmingham. Call 01908 613323, or visit *www.leisureshow.com*

November 6 -9: World Travel Market, ExCel, London. *www.wtmlondon.com*

Coach partners go separate ways

Pair say debts led to parting of company

Andrew Jarosz, northern correspondent

A partnership which had operated coaches for nearly 10 years was dissolved formally, after the company fell on hard times, despite question marks over whether it had operated legally over the last few years.

Deputy traffic commissioner Elizabeth Perrett, heard that although partners Harold Trevor Cooper and Daniel Francis Craggs held a licence as First Choice Travel, they had effectively been trading separately since June last year. Having considered all the implications, one of the partners has been granted a new operating licence, while the other must satisfy some conditions and the old licence will be revoked from April 10.

The two partners Harold Cooper and Daniel Craggs, faced a public inquiry at Hillcrest House, Leeds, to consider their new separate applications for one vehicle in respect of Coopers Executive Travel Ltd, and two vehicles in respect of First Choice Travel (Stanley) Ltd of Bridge Street, Stanley. In addition, consideration of disciplinary action on the licence of First Choice Travel was on the agenda.

What the operator said:

Roger Hird, appearing on behalf of the applicants said that nothing had changed since the issue of First Choice's licence to Mr Cooper alone. His clients had not made any moves to apply for a partnership licence, but for some reason, discs had been issued as if a partnership had come about. He conceded that the partners had been advised that they should apply for a new licence, which they had not done, but after an application for a variation, signed by Mr Craggs in August 2000, the Traffic Area Office had worked on the basis that this was a partnership.

"In addition, use has been made of the discs, rather naively, but their repute has been mitigated by an error in the Traffic Area Office," he said.

Giving evidence, Harold Cooper said he had started coach operation in 1973, when he took over his father's business with his brother. In 1991, he was running the business alone, having run the business down to just a garage business. He said that Mr Craggs had joined him in 1996, with him doing the maintenance and Craggs doing the bookwork. He said that the pair had agreed a split last year, as he wanted to go his own way, and he took a 51-seater coach. The bank account was closed in May, although the partnership has not been formally dissolved until new licences are granted.

First Choice Travel had been run by Harold Cooper and Daniel Craggs for almost 10 years

The partners in First Choice Travel had both applied for new licences in their own names

Deputy traffic commissioner Elizabeth Perrett raised concerns over work done by controversial firm Rush Travel

Harold Cooper told the inquiry he wanted to run just one coach and would study for his own CPC

Giving evidence, Daniel Craggs said: "In April last year, Trevor decided he wanted to go his own way. We'd been having a tough old time, and four or five individuals took the Michael out of us and left us with big debts. This left us with bad debts, poor cash flow, County Court Judgments, and the bailiffs always knew the right time to come round and repossess things."

He said that in July 2005 they had a fleet check and the VOSA examiner advised them to apply for a change of entity. They were still both paying off partnership debts after making individual voluntary arrangements with creditors.

Cross examined about a job to Prague which was performed on their behalf by Rush Travel/A Coach Company, Mr Craggs said that although they had given away their Blackpool express, and stopped doing continental work, there was one job outstanding for a travel agency, for which they no longer had a suitable coach and contracted in Rush Travel who had a good coach, and the coach ran on First Choice discs.

Asked by Miss Perrett whether this was a deliberate attempt to circumvent Rush Travel's loss of licence, Mr Craggs said: "If I'd known that there would be a suggestion of illegal subcontracting, I would gone to Arriva at Cleckheaton and hired one."

Referring to present arrangements, Mr Cooper said that he was the CPC holder (through grandfather rights) for both companies, but the arrangement with Mr Craggs was a temporary one. He drives and maintains his one coach at the Bridge Street premises and has a maintenance agreement with Durham Bus and Coach to inspect his vehicle. "I'm fulfilling duties as traffic manager for First Choice Travel, but really, I want

to operate just one coach, and not build the business up," he said.

Mr Craggs said that Mr Cooper put in six hours per week for him, but this will be a temporary arrangement. He said he intended to study for his own CPC, and there was a possibility of getting on a course in Wallsend next month.

Summing up for the two applicants, Mr Hird said that neither individual would claim that everything had been done, as it should have been. "I hope you might take the view that this is a good point to draw the line under the whole thing," he said. "You might be able to allow the modest applications subject to undertakings for each to arrange overdrafts of £10,000. Mr Cooper to attend a refresher CPC course, and Mr Craggs to provide paperwork confirming his statements regarding the Prague trip."

What the traffic commissioner said:

In her summation, Miss Perrett said her greatest concern was the question of working with Rush and A Coach Company. "If I take a quantum leap of faith, and it is wrong, then it becomes a question of repute," she said. "I need evidence backing Mr Craggs' claim, such as a letter of appreciation sent to First Choice Travel."

After an adjournment, the deputy traffic commissioner declared that the First Choice Travel licence will be revoked with effect from 23.59hrs on Monday, April 10, 2006. Coopers Executive Travel Ltd application was granted subject to evidence of an overdraft and with an undertaking to attend a refresher course. The second new application for First Choice Travel (Stanley) Ltd was put on hold pending further evidence being provided.

Deputy traffic commissioner Elizabeth Perrett granted the Coopers Executive Travel licence, subject to conditions, but the First Choice Travel (Stanley) Ltd application was put on hold pending further evidence being provided

Pilkingtons' reprieve

As expected, Pilkingtons of Accrington, trading as King Travel, regained its operators licence after facing a reconvened Public Inquiry.

This followed the initial public inquiry (*CBW*, March 1), where deputy traffic commissioner Mark Hinchliffe indicated that the applicants should reshuffle their family directorships.

He said at the earlier hearing that he was not happy about Mary Pilkington, wife of disqualified owner Raymond Pilkington, holding a directorship. He suggested that in addition to daughter Leon Pilkington being a licence holder, he would prefer to see brother Ian alongside her as director.

Undertakings which Mr Hinchliffe indicated at the earlier hearing might be attached to the licence had already been considered and agreed by members of the Pilkington family.

These undertakings have now been recorded on the licence to operate five vehicles.

1. Safety inspections will be pre-planned and never more than four weeks apart. Vehicles will not thereafter be used until all defects are rectified and the vehicle(s) signed off as being in a fit and serviceable condition.
2. A nil defect daily reporting system will be operated. All defects reported will be rectified before vehicles go on the road.
3. The company would join and maintain membership of the FTA, and the FTA will be instructed to undertake a full audit of all maintenance and systems. The first audit to be after six months of operation, and the second after a further six months, with both audit reports to be immediately forwarded to the Traffic Area Office, marked for the attention of the Traffic Commissioner.
4. That Raymond Pilkington will have no involvement whatsoever with the company.
5. Alan and John Pilkington will have no involvement with the management of the company.
6. The company will comply with all the rules and regulations relating to any bus station used, and it will be courteous. As any breach of bus station rules and regulations will directly damage repute.
7. All drivers employed by the company will receive training in all aspects of driver duties within four weeks of the commencement of their employment. Proof of compliance with this undertaking will be kept.

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By Sue Reynolds

Concessionary travel scheme: is it fair?

Free bus travel for the elderly may sound like a good idea, writes Sue Reynolds, but has the Government really thought it through?

I recently spent a delightful day on a market stall, in the sun, making hundreds of people very happy while at the same time hammering nails into the coffin of our successful business, that has been 20 years in the making.

Every year, in the towns and cities of this county, our local Bus and Coach Operators' Association runs a series of promotional days. We work together to hand out information, brochures and literature - mine and everyone else's. For these few days we are all best friends. The public receives bus timetables, coach excursion and holiday brochures, venue details, a friendly service and hours of free advice. Today's question: 'I've heard all about it on the news, I've got this concessionary travel pass, what can I do with it?'

This is Hertfordshire and amazingly, to everyone's delight and with all credit to the county and district councils, the pass gives free travel throughout the county and even across the county borders, and no time restrictions. The timetables disappeared from the display; the countywide bus map - usually a slow mover - was going like hot cakes.

The future for these pass holders is of no more daytime TV; journeys which in the past were far too difficult - not to say impossible, are suddenly achievable and easy. 'Free' makes organising complex routing and changing buses so much easier!

The likely result of this will be a welcome increase to trade and visitors in town centres across the county. Hertfordshire's many venues and attractions might expect a real boost. And all because this massive number of potential customers appears to be willing to tolerate a level of inconvenience in return for the opportunity to get out for free. The clear feeling amongst the card-holders I met was that they were going to be delighted to leave the car behind. The ball is in our court, as an industry let us rise to this challenge.

But we run a coach company. A substantial part of our business is the day excursion programme. To produce this, weeks are spent agonising over the choice of stately home, flower show and cream tea. I fear my mental anguish is wasted on some people; all they really want is a day out, a bit of companionship and it doesn't really matter where we take them. At times I feel we are a branch of social services. Are bus companies prepared to provide this level of service for your new day trippers?

Not a truly representative sample, but today it was clear that card holders were looking forward to the prospect of travelling for leisure and pleasure. So how is that different from coach travel? Coach services are denied access to all these funding opportunities.

A funding regimen is not a reflection of the real market it is just the imposition of an outcome. Often not the intended outcome, because the public has a way of doing something very different from anything that had been envisaged. That outcome, however, will only be there for as long as the funding remains. There is no guarantee that free today will engender loyalty tomorrow. Perhaps free today should be regarded as a means of destroying the opposition to generate 'freehand' tomorrow.

Sue Reynolds is a director of Reynolds Diplomat

If there's a burning issue you want to get off your chest, write to Open Platform, CBW, 3 The Office Village, Cygnet Park, Hampton, Peterborough PE7 8FD or e-mail *cbwinbox@rouncymedia.co.uk*

Has anyone stopped to ask:

- What happens when there is not enough space on the bus services for all the free travellers?
- As a society do we want to see large numbers of elderly and disabled passengers as standees on moving vehicles?
- Are bus drivers able to cope with the demands of large numbers of elderly and disabled passengers intending to spend longer periods of time on their buses?

From today, in Scotland these passengers have free travel not only on local services but across the country - even on National Express and similar services. The Chancellor has announced his intention to provide much greater freedom of scheduled service travel in England in just two years time. So what hope for coach operators whose customers live under the less generous authorities then?

IN NEXT WEEK'S ISSUE...

Esteem unleashed

CBW's Martin Cole hops aboard the first bus from East Lancs' new in-house design team

PLUS We pay a visit to Bibbys of Ingleton in its 50th anniversary year

PLUS All the news and views that matter

Send your letters to *cbwinbox@rouncymedia.co.uk*, fax 0845 2802927 or write to: Inbox, CBW, 3 The Office Village, Cygnet Park, Hampton, Peterborough PE7 8FD

LETTER OF THE WEEK

I write to add my voice to the many complaining about the coach parking price rise on the Isle of Wight (*CBW*, April 5). I have operated holiday coach tours to the Isle of Wight for the past 15 years and never before felt so disappointed by the actions of its council.

It is simply not possible mid stream to "build-in" this additional cost to a tour, which is effectively £2.00 per passenger per tour. I intend therefore to end my current departures to the IOW as soon as practically possible and then boycott the destination until common sense prevails.

Hotels, attractions, tour guides and ferry operators shall all be informed of my reasons to cease operations to the IOW.

Kevin Radley, Radley Holidays, Brigg, Lincs

WIN A BUS! Sort of... Drop us a line and if your letter is chosen as our Letter of the Week, you'll receive a top-notch coach or bus model courtesy of our friends at Corgi. Please try to keep your letters under 200 words. The editor's decision is final.

IT, phone home

Many thanks for Paul Clapham's excellent series on marketing, which struck a chord with me for a number of reasons.

As part of a recent contract I had to sub-contract a number of other coaches, and discovered that many of my 'competitors' are about as far behind Mr Clapham's utopian view as it's possible to be. I had several promises to return calls from telephonists who could not deal with a simple inquiry about availability, and only a couple of them resulted in the promised call back.

One operator's phone rang without reply, and I was wondering if he was out of business until I saw one of his school contracts operating later in the day.

As for e-mail, many operators maintain only a webmail address at AOL or Hotmail, and 'maintain' may be too strong a word, as they look at mail only every few days.

We don't possess ACT! or much of the specialised software Mr Clapham suggests, but even Outlook - which comes with Microsoft Office - is capable of maintaining contact lists, 'to do' lists and task lists. It's what we are using, but we are looking right now at what other packages are available. Some of them are just 'freeware' yet seem pretty useful.

There was a time when our customers weren't very sophisticated, but these days, even school children have a better understanding of IT than most operators.

The industry is undoubtedly losing out to more sophisticated businesses - if you can book an airline flight on-line, you should be able to book a simple coach excursion!

Name and address supplied

Marksman spot on

I write in reference to the Open Platform by Robin Littlewood of Demauris Associates (*CBW*, March 22).

I find that, on the whole, the attitude towards pricing is something that every conscientious coach operator in the land should be afraid of.

Mr Littlewood doesn't seem to think much of 'Marksman' for publishing rates that, in his view, were unobtainable. Way back in 1995, I and the company directors who previously employed me also felt that Marksman's rates were unobtainable.

However, Marksman quite coldly pricked our conscience in as much as informing us that the writing's on the wall.

It wasn't a case of 'we should be getting these rates' it was a case of 'if we don't get these rates will we still be here in five years' time?'.

Well, we did charge the rates suggested by Marksman and, with the help of Marksman's rates, revamped a fleet of 26 mid-aged vehicles into a fleet of 30 vehicles, all bought brand new within a five-year timespan.

Mark Self

MD, Roadliner Passenger Transport Ltd

Real team spirit

On Saturday, March 25, the Boston United team coach broke down at the team hotel before a match at Carlisle United. This, as I am sure you can imagine, caused me, as managing director of Sleafordian Coaches, a great concern. However, after a few phone calls between Boston and Carlisle United officials, Chris Reay, owner of Reays Coaches, came to the rescue.

He reassured me that not only would he transport Boston to the ground but also he would allow my driver to return the Boston United team and officials home in his coach.

This arrangement then also allowed us to bring the Lincoln City team, who share the coach with Boston, back to Carlisle on Tuesday, March 28.

Further to this, Chris organised the repair of our coach at his workshops and returned it to Carlisle United's ground on Tuesday, ready for Lincoln City's departure and thus allowing us to return the Carlisle team coach back to its rightful owner.

I would like to thank all concerned in resolving this unfortunate situation.

Mark Broughton,

Director, Sleafordian Coaches, Sleaford

5 YEARS AGO **EU ministers agreed to adopt a standard maximum bus length of 15m, bringing to an end the confusion over different rules in different countries.**

10 YEARS AGO **The TGWU was in hot water after allegations in a leaflet to be handed out to passengers prompted the threat of legal action.**

20 YEARS AGO **De-regulation dominated the news, as experts argued whether or not it would be good for the industry and a preliminary report was released.**

April 12 in history:

1861 The American Civil War begins

1945 US President Franklin Delano Roosevelt dies

1961 Yuri Gagarin becomes the first man in space

1975 The US admits defeat in Cambodia

Putting students first

Four years on, First Student is still quietly beavering away building new relationships. Mark Williams visited its London office to find out how it works

American Linda Howard came to First Student with a wealth of experience – having run 26 vehicles herself. "My interest in running school buses came in 1999 when I put my son on the school bus. I realised straight away that there was a problem. So I bought the School Run Company with a friend and ran it using our mothers' intuition." Howard sold the company in 2004, and First Student, approached her. She said: "In the States, there are 37 different federal regulations applying to the system. Those principles would be helpful here. In the UK there are more regulations for the carriage of farm animals than for the carriage of children."

With 107 vehicles running under the First Student 'yellow buses' banner already, and discussions underway for several new pilot schemes, MD Linda Howard sees a great future for home-to-school transport.

From her office alongside Platform 1 at Paddington Station in Central London, Howard co-ordinates a splinter of First Group which very few people really understand. It's not about buses or about yellow paint, she says, but it's about the industry's clients, who in this case aren't schools, local authorities or parents, but children.

First Student is an unusual company in that it is rather more a business support agency than an operating company. Driven by First's chief executive Moir Lockhead, the idea began with the import of Bluebird American school buses, but the vision for home-to-schools transport grew until it went much further than mere buses.

In almost parallel evolution with opinion then being formed at West Yorkshire's PTE Metro, Howard envisaged a package of improvements which take a holistic view of what's wrong with school transport, and the outcome is a "product" she says.

"First Student is all about business development, education, support, quality control... that's what I mean by a product. It's the 'yellow bus' bit that wrong-foots people. When I talk about yellow buses, I'm less concerned about the colour they are, and even the fact they are buses is incidental," she says.

In essence, Howard provides a brokering service, offering a complete vision for the school journey which takes in the planning, training and commissioning of imaginative services. At the core is recognition of what the stakeholders want, but with the emphasis on the children.

"School children are commuters, nothing less. Yet they tell me that when they complain about the school bus, nobody listens to them. Where else are customers treated like this?" she says.

First Student doesn't offer rigid solutions - it doesn't always involve First's operators running the buses. It examines the problem and provides bespoke solutions which match the need, says Howard: "At the moment, most of what we've done is for private schools, or schools that have had funding removed.

"After discussing what's required, we usually start by getting the postcodes of all the potential passengers and provide planning for the vehicles and routes to maximise their efficiency. The routes are very bespoke and even take into consideration the age of the child, giving preference to younger children at the best stops."

The point, she says, is to provide a service attractive enough not just to cater for existing bus ridership, but to grow the numbers alongside an overall travel plan for the school: "We are setting out to convert children from car to bus, not dent the numbers who prefer to walk or cycle.

"The truth is, kids don't want to go to school with their parents. They'd much rather be on a decent bus. When I was a child in America, I couldn't wait to get on the school bus.

"As First Student, we'd like to see real, dedicated school services on a city or town-wide basis. It's a lot more difficult to prove the positive results when you are running just four or five buses on a yellow bus scheme.

"The principles of what we offer tick so many of the government's boxes - reduction of congestion and pollution, safe routes to school - and some more surprising benefits."

> **You can't point the finger of blame at operators for the standards of school vehicles if the lowest bid always wins the contract**

Howard says one First Student pilot in Bristol, which carried around 90 children each morning, ran out of funding and came to an end. The result was 61% of users had a drop in attendance of over 10%, with 18% of those students exhibiting a drop in attendance of over 30%.

The Sutton Trust report 'No More School Run' last year said that its proposal for a nationwide scheme of 'yellow buses' - dedicated vehicles with trained drivers, picking up pupils with statutory transport rights and those without - would costs a total of £186 million, which Howard believes is a small price to pay for the benefits, which not only include the obvious safety and environmental aspects but would allow poorer sections of the public to exercise parental choice over schools.

The statutory three-mile and two-mile limits beyond which secondary and primary schools, respectively, are compelled to provide free transport are, says Howard, a bit of a red herring. She points to the Hebden Bridge scheme using Bluebird vehicles, launched in

> **As First Student, we'd like to see real, dedicated school services on a city-wide basis**

2002, and says the issue here was that none of the journey was safe to walk, leaving cars and buses the only option.

"If you want to see modal shift, you have first to look at why parents do the school run each morning."

One of the problems, she says, is that there are no recognised standards for schools transport, and as there is no national leadership on the issue, councils have been free to plough their own furrow. This usually involves lowest-cost tendering, when best-value would make more sense.

"You can't point the finger of blame at operators for the standards of school vehicles if the lowest bid always wins the contract. There is little or no monitoring on a national level and it's subjective at council level, although this appears to be changing."

Of course there are good operators, but the quality is ad hoc and patchy.

"There is a funding issue. Some of a good yellow bus scheme actually addresses this, by providing accessible buses where pupils require them. In between home-to-school journeys, children are moved around all the time. Yet it's not unusual to see the home-to-school vehicle followed into the school by another hired vehicle taking the children somewhere else.

"The yellow bus scheme can address this. If the vehicle's the right quality, it can leave the school refilled, and with no dead mileage which schools currently pay for."

The central tenets of what First Student does are agreed standards for the vehicles, improved inclusion of children in the bus system, extensive driver training, and an understanding that the buses can and should be used for other student movement during the day, the evening and even through summer. The idea of two and three school runs in the morning and afternoons is the ideal scenario, with usage during the day for moving students between sites. This involves getting the education authorities to work together with the transport providers which includes the transport executives and the operator(s).

But the precise formula is arrived at by discussion, and latterly has even included First Student sub-contracting independent operators to fulfil the transport element.

Most recently, it has signed up a scheme on behalf of Medway Council, providing its expertise to produce the planning, training and other areas, leaving Nu Venture Coaches free to concentrate on running the three BMC 1100FEs - high-floor vehicles with wheelchair lifts for full DDA compliance, designed by First.

It has already registered success, with a 50% modal shift from car to bus, and First Student is keen to investigate any other similar partnerships with operators and local authorities.

There are other schemes in the pipeline, too. First Student is working with three authorities on much bigger pilot schemes which it hopes will be in place by September. Slowly but surely, says Howard, the message that schools transport is more an investment than a cost is sinking in.

CONTACTS

- **The Sutton Trust** *www.thesuttontrust.com*
- **First Student** 3rd Floor, Macmillan House, Paddington Station, London W2 1TY Tel: 0207 9229596

The First Student wish list

Established, national principles for school transport, to include:
- **Longer schools contracts to encourage investment**
- **Parameters for vehicle type relevant to each situation**
- **Approved passenger management training for all school vehicle drivers**
- **Inclusive transport schemes open to all pupils**
- **Recognition that improved vehicle utilisation reduces cost**
- **Removal of two-tier operator licensing standards**

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- Full payment is required at the time of booking unless credit facilities exist.
- Once made, bookings are non-amendable and non-refundable. Credit account holders must honour the full booking payment in the event of cancellation
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EURO TUNNEL

ACCELERATE TO FRANCE IN 35 MINUTES

CBW

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COACH TOURISM COUNCIL
Promoting Travel and Tourism by Coach

cpt

Weighty issue

With Easter in the offing, VOSA will be planning its annual Operation Tourist spot-checks at unannounced locations up and down the country.

The results each year vary. Looking back, I see that in 2004, 950 checks found 86 immediate prohibitions and 108 delayed, plus 97 other irregularities subsequently investigated. That's not great.

Now we all know that VOSA officers do a bit more targeting than perhaps they'd let on, so we need not run away with the notion that those figures are the average; the average from some of the tattiest vehicles on the road, maybe. And let's not forget to point out (as it seems VOSA do not) that 86 serious offences in 950 vehicles doesn't mean almost 10% of the fleet is dodgy; it could mean that 43 vehicles had two serious defects each.

Last year's was marginally better, but I can't help thinking that the industry can do better than this.

One area that even the best-run operator could be caught out is on vehicle weights. Indeed, the best-run operators may be at increased risk of breaching the 18-tonne limit. Some modern coaches are pushing 14 tonnes unladen, and a full load of extended tour passengers on their way back from France could well make the weighbridge a bit of an embarrassment.

In fairness to VOSA, it hasn't been over-zealous chasing responsible operators for being marginally overweight (the coaches, that is, not the directors!) but the issue bears some attention, especially if you've 50 or more seats full. The answer to the fact that 50 passengers and luggage can these days weigh four or five tonnes is to de-seat a little or to run tri-axles for the extra seven or eight tonnes. Failing that, to follow the example of haulage and fit axle self-weighers, perhaps.

Just don't get caught out and become one of VOSA's statistics...

Mark Williams

Mark Williams
Editor

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How drivers can cash in at Brighton festival

A special incentive scheme is being offered to coach drivers who take groups to the World Sand Sculpture Festival in Brighton this summer.

Ancient Rome will come to the south coast resort when around 60 artists from all over the world will create one of the world's largest sand sculpture festivals. From June 1 to September 10, Brighton will be home to the Coliseum, the Pantheon and other images of the Eternal City.

Nearly 10,000 tons - 500 lorry loads - of special rough-edged river sand is being shipped from Holland and will stretch across 40,000 square feet of Brighton Marina. Visitors in the first days of the festival will be able to watch the artists in action.

The sculpture festival is open daily from 11am to 6pm and tickets are £6 for adults and £4 for children from four to 12. Groups of 20 or more qualify for a £1 discount off the price of adult tickets. As an added incentive drivers will get to keep an extra £1 per ticket if they bring a group of 20 or more people. The driver collects and pays for the group, who pay £5 for adult tickets, and then keeps the additional £1 per head, meaning that they can make a minimum of £20 for each group they bring to the event.

Drivers also qualify for free entry and they must give notice of their visit in advance and how many people will be in the group. That way the tickets can be prepared so there will be no need to queue.

There is coach parking in Madeira Drive, which is right outside the entrance to Blackrock, on Brighton Marina, where the festival is held.

■ For bookings, call Huib on 07881 760364 or email: *huib@sandsculpturefestival.com*

Sands of time: a sculpture of the Roman Coliseum made at a festival in Belgium

Showcasing Scotland

Tourism officials in Scotland are aiming for a 50% increase in visitor numbers through a new strategy that includes the development of a scheme to raise standards across the industry and establishing a network to link local authorities and heritage sites.

The strategy will be the subject of major discussions at VisitScotland Expo 2006, the annual showcase of the country's tourism industry, which is being held at the SEEC in Glasgow on April 26 and 27.

Running alongside the strategy will be a new marketing drive from VisitScotland, which will enable tourism businesses to pick worldwide marketing opportunities from a range of local, national and international campaigns, which will all be available through one point of contact through VisitScotland.

More than 13,000 tourism businesses have bought into the marketing scheme that includes campaigns and events around the world. The agency is now offering a new range of products that will help businesses to market themselves more effectively.

The businesses now have the opportunity to buy into specific marketing campaigns by purchasing promotional packages.

Eddie Byers, VisitScotland's director of industry engagement, said: "Last year was a great year for the tourism industry in Scotland and we expect 2006 to be just as successful. This year's marketing opportunities campaign builds on the success of last year and introduces a number of important improvements.

"These demonstrate that VisitScotland is listening to businesses and is developing the products that meet their needs. Business relationship managers from offices throughout VisitScotland's network are now in touch to help them identify the opportunities."

For more details log on to *www.visitscotland.org* and follow the link to marketing opportunities.

■ Traditionallly, not many operators make the journey north for the VisitScotland Expo but those who do will be able to pick up tips on touring opportunities in the country. Hotels small and large, attractions, heritage sites, tourist boards and ferry companies will all be exhibiting over the two days.

Positive tourism in Ireland

A new exchange scheme has been set up in Ireland which will see tourism staff in Belfast and Dublin swap staff ideas in a bid to promote best practice in the tourism industry.

Dublin Tourism's Isobel Sommers and Mary Grogan are pictured with Sara Graham and Lisa Prior, from the Belfast Welcome Centre, during the first part of an exchange between the two cities.

The Belfast Welcome Centre, which is managed by the Belfast Visitor and Convention Bureau and funded by Belfast City Council and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, is part of a network of 29 tourist information centres and recently scored very highly in external evaluations when compared with other tourist information facilities across Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Staff from the Belfast Welcome Centre will travel to Dublin in the coming weeks to share their knowledge and learn from colleagues there.

The scheme is a logical follow-on from moves in the tourism industry that have seen Ireland promoted as a single destination, with tourist boards on both sides of the border working together to encourage more visitors across the island of Ireland.

From left: Isobel Sommers, Sara Graham, Mary Grogan and Lisa Prior

High jumping at Hexham

Northumbria is an underrated county and more coach operators should consider adding tours of the north to their programmes. Those groups who do make the trip should find time to visit Hexham racecourse, which is the highest course in Britain and has fine views across the moorland and fells.

Hexham stages National Hunt fixtures throughout the year and admission is £12 to the Members' Enclosure and £8 to the Paddock (£6 for senior citizens).

Groups of 20 or more paying customers qualify for a 20 per cent discount on entry to both enclosures at all meetings, providing bookings and payments are made seven days in advance. Coach drivers qualify for free admission and there is ample free parking.

The racecourse is close to other Northumbrian attractions, including Hadrian's Wall and MetroCentre, Europe's largest shopping and leisure centre. It is also only 30 minutes away from Newcastle upon Tyne.

■ For more information and fixtures and group incentives, contact Dennis Gallagher, the racecourse's marketing manager, on 01434 606881 or email; *hexrace@aol.com*. Alternatively go to *www.hexham-racecourse.co.uk*

■ Under starter's orders – see page 10

Transport of delights

If your groups are out and about in Shropshire this Easter weekend, they can view vintage buses and coaches at the annual Midlands Festival of Transport, which is being held at Weston Park.

The stately home on the Staffordshire/Shropshire border is staging the festival on Easter Sunday and Monday, April 16 and 17, and other attractions include steam train rides, fairground dodgems, autojumble and trade stands and a craft fair. Jake Semtex will be performing motorcycle stunts and there will also be displays by the Piston Rings junior motorcycle team.

Weston Park also offers reductions on admission to the house and gardens.

■ Admission is £6 for adults and £3 for children. For more information call 01543 417878.

Garden party: the immaculate grounds of Weston Park, in the West Midlands

New berths over white cliffs of Dover

A major redevelopment of the Western Docks at Dover is being planned that will see the introduction of four new ferry berths and a new marina. Consultants have drawn up a long-term strategy for the port that show that the Eastern Docks ferry terminal is reaching capacity and there is no room for expansion.

With the main A20 port access road experiencing record levels of freight traffic, Dover Harbour Board says the Western Docks offer a solution to congestion and can provide sufficient ferry capacity for the next few decades.

The board is consulting with the government and other agencies to create a buffer zone to assemble freight vehicles off the A20 between Dover and Folkestone and manage the flow rates within the port.

Chief executive Bob Goldfield said: "The port must respond positively and act decisively to ensure it has capacity and facilities to meet growing traffic flows and to do it in a way that minimises the impact on the town.

"With the support of the government and other agencies, we can build a second ferry terminal and create a system to control the flow of lorry traffic passing through the town."

For the Western Docks to function as a ferry terminal, it will be necessary to reclaim the Tidal Harbour and Granville Dock marina area. To compensate, the board plans to create a new marina in the outer harbour linked to the new sea sports centre that is due to open on the beach next year.

Mr Goldfield described the port as being at the crossroads and to do nothing was not an option. "We know that traffic will grow for many years to come," he said. "And if we do not increase port capacity congestion will worsen and it will be a missed opportunity."

Take the snow train: book now for a group discount on the Severn Valley Railway Santa trips

Get in early for Santa

We may finally be seeing the first rays of spring but the Severn Valley Railway is hoping to get up a head of steam by offering coach operators early discounts on its Santa train in December.

The 16-mile Kidderminster to Bridgnorth steam heritage line runs an intensive service of steam-hauled Santa Specials to Santa's grotto at Arley Station during weekends in the run-up to Christmas.

Around 30,000 people make the trip each year and most trains run full but to get 2006 Santa train ticket sales off to a brisk start, the railway is offering £9.25 tickets at £8.25 for pre-booked parties travelling to see Santa during the weekend of December 2 & 3. The price includes train fare and a present from Santa for children aged between one and 15.

John Leach, the Severn Valley Railway Marketing Manager, said: "We have never had to hard sell the Santa trains as the nostalgic combination of period steam and a traditional visit to see Santa have always dovetailed wonderfully here.

"By the time we reach the autumn, we'll be well into our stride with Santa train bookings, but it makes good sense to provide a bit of early impetus for the market now.

"It's the first time we've addressed ourselves to coach operators in this way, so it'll be interesting to see how they respond."

■ For bookings and more information, contact Lisa Meredith, the group travel co-ordinator, on 01299 403816.

Beamish puffs with pride over new attractions

Puffing Billy and a Masonic temple are among the new attractions at Beamish Open Air Museum, the award-winning attraction in County Durham that opens for the 2006 season at Easter.

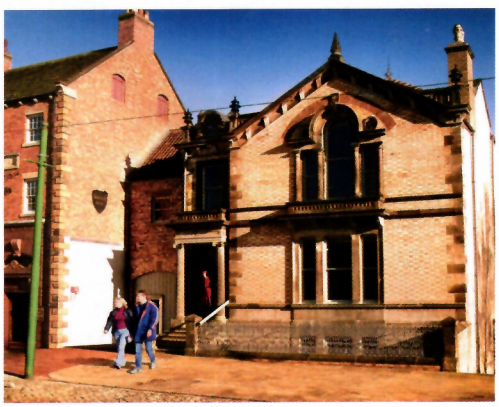
The 1913 Masonic temple opens this weekend and is already attracting considerable interest from masons up and down the country, while May sees Puffing Billy steam into Beamish. This is a working replica of William Hedley's 1813 locomotive and visitors will be able to take a ride at Pockerley Waggonway on a steam train hauled by the locomotive.

"There has been a great deal of interest in the Masonic Temple particularly from Masonic Lodges around the UK and coach bookings are flying in," said Trish Hall, Beamish's marketing manager. "It is amazing how many people are curious about what went on behind the scenes of a Masonic Temple. Both the Masonic Temple and Puffing Billy are going to be very popular exhibits at Beamish."

The new attractions will be alongside the existing features that draw more than 300,000 visitors a year to Beamish. The museum recreates life in the area as it was in the early 1800s and 1900s through the pit cottages, shops, schoolroom farm and town street, all complete with costumed characters. It also runs a series of special events throughout the year, for which there is no additional charge.

Rates for groups of 20 or more for the summer are £11 for adults, £10 for senior citizens aged 60 and above and £6 for children aged five to 16. Coach drivers qualify for free admission and hospitality and there is ample free coach parking.

■ For group bookings and more information, call 0191 370 4026 or email: *bookings@beamish.org.uk*



Trams and teddy boys

Roll back the years at the Crich Tramway Village, which is holding a 1950s weekend on Sunday and Monday, April 30 and May 1.

There will be live music from the Rhythm Aces rock band and period cars together with the vintage trams and street entertainment. Visitors in period dress or driving 1950s cars will qualify for reduced admission.

Crich Tramway Village is open daily from April 1 to October 29. Admission for groups of 10 or more is £8 for adults, £7 for senior citizens and £4 for children. Coach drivers qualify for free admission and a free meal. Coach parking is free.

The village is near Matlock, Derbyshire, and is eight miles from Junction 28 of the M1.

■ For bookings and more information, call 01773 854321.

Action stations for Brunel anniversary

This year marks the 200th anniversary of the birth of Isambard Kingdom Brunel, Britain's greatest engineer, and among the many celebrations is the launch of the first guided tours of Brunel's original railway station in Bristol.

The Great Western Railway terminus is the oldest surviving station in the world. It was built in the style of a medieval cathedral and completed in two years. The first train service left Bristol to London in 1841. The station is now home to the British Empire & Commonwealth Museum, which has developed the Brunel Tour.

The Great Western station

The tour, which will run on selected dates until October, covers the passenger shed, the underground vaults and the GWR boardroom. Pre-booking is essential and tickets cost £6.95 for adults and £3.95 for children.

■ Call 0117 925 4980.

Spanning the ages: Brunel's Iron Bridge at Telford is included in a group visit

Going undercover at Ironbridge

A costume workshop about underwear and a guided walk are among the new specialist packages offered to groups in a guide published by the 10 museums at Ironbridge Gorge, near Telford in Shropshire.

Among the new offers are two historic costume workshops followed by a visit to Blists Hill Victorian town. The first is The Secret World of Underwear, which looks at the origins of the corset and other undergarments, while the second explores how the Victorians recycled garments.

Other new options include a guided walking tour through the ceramic heartland of the site that include the villages of Coalport and Jackfield and a visit to the restored Jackfield Tile Museum. The guide provides full details of these museums together with the other sites that include the Coalbrookdale Museum of Iron and Darby Houses, Broseley Pipeworks, the Museum of the Gorge, the Iron Bridge itself and Enginuity, the interactive design and technology centre.

Reduced all sites tickets are available for groups of 20 more and cost £12.15 for adults, £10.60 for senior citizens and £8 for students and children. These are valid from spring to autumn and there are further discounts during winter. The tickets allow admission into each of the 10 museums over a six-day period. Individual admission tickets are also available.

There is free coach parking adjacent to each site apart from Broseley Pipeworks, where there is on-street parking. Coach drivers and group organisers qualify for free admission and a complimentary refreshment voucher.

■ For bookings and more information, call 01952 884391 or email: *visits@ironbridge.org.uk*

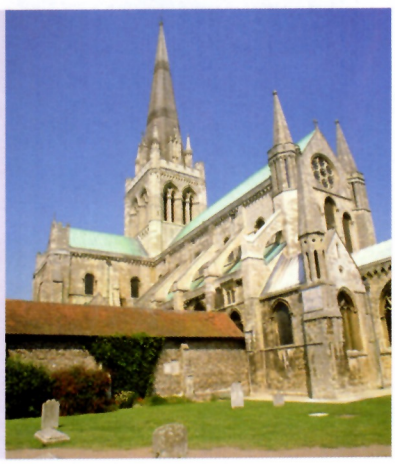
Saying it with flowers

Follow the scent to Chichester Cathedral and enjoy the Sixth Biennial Flower Festival, which is being held from Thursday to Saturday, June 1 to 3. Admission costs £7.50 for adults, £5.50 for senior citizens and children from 13 to 18 and £2 for children from five to 12.

Groups of 20 or more qualify for a discounted rate of £5.50 a head and the cathedral authorities request that bookings are made in advance.

Coaches are booked in at 10-minute intervals for setting down passengers at the Bell Tower next to the cathedral and there is a coach park that is approximately a 10-minute walk from the cathedral.

■ For bookings and more information, call the cathedral office on 01243 812480.



Lunch and all that jazz

Take five and enjoy Sunday lunch to the sound of jazz at Weston Park, a 17th century stately home on the Staffordshire/Shropshire border. The lunches start on April 23, when there also will be a Punch & Judy show, and will be held once a month through the summer. Music will be provided by a duo.

The two-course lunches will be available in the Stables Restaurant and cost £18.50 for adults and £12 for children under 12. When pre-booked, the rates include entry into the park and gardens. Weston Park, which is the ancestral home of the Earls of Bradford, dates from 1671 and is set in 1,000 acres of parkland designed originally by Capability Brown.

■ For bookings and more information, call 01952 852100 or go to *www.weston-park.com*

Circus fun with Mooky

Visitors to Blackpool should find time to visit the Blackpool Tower Circus, which opened its doors last weekend. This year's production is called Mooky's Angels and features an all-female line-up of artistes, including the world's only female human cannonball.

The proceedings will be presided over by Mooky the Clown, a favourite at the tower for a number of years. The show will run daily, except Fridays, until November 5.

After experiencing the circus, groups can explore the tower's other attractions including the Victorian ballroom, Jungle Jim's Adventure Playground and the Tower Top Ride.

Blackpool Tower and Circus has a dedicated team that can provide tailor-made packages for groups. Pre-booked prices start from £7 per person.

■ For more information call Blackpool Live on 01253 292019 or go to *www.blackpooltower.co.uk*

Photo finish

William Golden helps to mark operators' cards as he suggests their groups have a punt on a day at the races

Everybody likes a flutter these days, be it on football, horses, dogs or who will win the latest series of Big Brother. In fact, with talk of super casinos and the rise of spread and internet betting, it could be argued that Britain is in the grip of a gambling fever.

Whatever the novelty bets, the bedrock of the gambling industry remains horse racing and a day out at a racecourse, be it flat racing or over the jumps, is a perfect add-on to any coach operator's day programme.

So as racing is the sport of kings, let us start with the jewel in the crown - the Derby at Epsom. The Blue Riband of flat racing has enjoyed a surge in popularity since it was switched from Wednesday to Saturday and it is the perfect place for a stylish group outing. Last year's race was a banker for favourite backers who cashed in when Johnny Murtagh steered the 3-1 favourite Motivator home to record his third triumph in the race.

This year's Derby is being run on Saturday June 3 with the Oaks being run the previous day on Vodafone Ladies Day. A feature of the big race is the line-up of open-top buses in the Lonsdale Enclosure near the winning post. On Derby Day open-top double-deckers only are admitted and must be pre-booked. The cost is £1,250 per coach and includes admission to The Hill, the area at the centre of the course.

On Vodafone Ladies Day, single or double-deckers are admitted and the price is £300 per vehicle, including admission to The Hill.

The Upper Tattenham Enclosure can accommodate single and double-decker coaches on both days - singles only in the front row - and pre-booked prices are £725 for a single-decker in the front row on Derby day, dropping to £70 on Ladies Day. Double-deckers are charged £500 and £70 respectively. Midibuses (maximum seating of 24) are charged £70 on Ladies Day but are not admitted on Derby day. Pre-booked single or double-deckers may park in the Walton Area for £440 on Derby day and £90 on Ladies Day.

Parking on The Hill costs £220 for a bus or coach on Derby day and £70 on Ladies Day. Midicoaches are charged £130 and £50 respectively.

Groups of 12 or more qualify for discounted admission to the Grandstand on Derby day. Tickets are £30 each and £24 for Ladies Day. Special picnic packages are being offered on Ladies Day.

The curtain goes up on racing at Epsom on Wednesday, April 26 when groups of 12 or more qualify for £9 admission to the Grandstand. Thursday July 6 sees the start of the Epsom Live! meetings that combine evening racing with a concert. Subsequent Epsom Live! evenings are held on July 13, 20 and August 3. Grandstand tickets for groups of 12 or more are £20 each, except on July 13 when they drop to £16 each.

Epsom is just off Junctions 8 or 9 of the M25.

■ For more details about group bookings, call 01372 460372.

A day at the races is great fun for rookie gambler and seasoned punter alike

Stand at deliver; crowds pack the Knavesmire for York's Ebor Festival

Big race switched to York course

The Royal Ascot meeting may be back at its home course this year after decamping to York in 2005, but the city has ample compensation in staging the St Leger.

The final classic of the season is being run at the Knavesmire in September, while major renovation work is undertaken at Doncaster.

The season opens at York with the three-day Dante Festival from Tuesday to Thursday, May 17 to 19, when groups of six or more who book in advance are admitted to the Grandstand and Paddock for £14 on each day.

There is another three-day festival from Friday to Sunday, June 16 to 18, which includes the Timeform Charity Day on the Saturday, and admission rates for groups of six or more are £10 on the Friday and Sunday and £14 on the Saturday.

There is racing on Friday and Saturday, July 14 and 15, when group admission is £10 and £14 respectively, as it is on Thursday July 27 and 29.

The highlight of the York racing year is the Ebor Festival, which runs from Tuesday to Thursday, August 22 to 24. Admission to the Grandstand and Paddock is £25 per day and there are no group discounts.

In September the St Leger Festival is on Friday and Saturday, September 8 and 9. The opening day is Ladies Day and admission to the Grandstand and Paddock is £13 for pre-booked groups of six or more, rising to £17 per person on St Leger Day.

All things equine are rounded off on Friday and Saturday, October 6 and 7, when admission to the Grandstand and Paddock is £10 and £13 a head respectively.

All group discounts are valid only when bookings are made in advance and there will be one free ticket for every 20 purchased. Accredited coach drivers are admitted free to the Grandstand or course enclosure on production of worksheets.

Tickets for the over 65s and junior racegoers may not be booked in advance because proof of age is required on the day.

■ For bookings and more information, call 01904 620911 or go to *www.yorkracecourse.co.uk*

Brighton breezy

Free bets, afternoon tea and behind the scenes tours are among the packages on the cards for groups who fancy a day out at Brighton races.

If you fancy a flutter, a £20 per person package includes admission to the grandstand and paddock enclosure, welcome drink, a £5 betting voucher and race programme. Shell out another £10 per person and the Classic Raceday package comprises entry to the Premier Enclosure, a welcome drink, afternoon tea and cake, a £5 Tote betting voucher, a programme and a tour of the course.

Groups of 12 or more may reserve a table in the Silks Restaurant in the Premier Enclosure for the entire afternoon or evening. The deal costs £35 per person and comprises a three-course meal with coffee but not the cost of entry to the enclosure. Hospitality packages cost from £75 to £105 per person, excluding VAT, and include silver service dining in a private suite, admission to the Premier Enclosure and a raceday programme.

Admission is £13 to the Grandstand and Paddock Enclosure and £18 to the Premier Enclosure. Groups of 15 or more qualify for a 20% discount. Coach parking is free and there is free admission for drivers.

The racecourse is easy to reach from the A27 Brighton bypass. If you are approaching on the A23, go east on the A27 and follow the signs to Sussex University. Then take the B2123 to Woodingdean, turn right at the lights and the course is a mile on the left.

■ Tickets or badges may be booked in advance by calling 01273 603580 or at *www.brighton-racecourse.co.uk*

All weather at Kempton

Turf purists may frown but Kempton Park is hoping it is on a home banker after an £18 million renovation programme that has turned the Sunbury-on-Thames, Surrey, track into the first floodlit and all-weather racecourse in the south of England.

Coach groups should be among the beneficiaries as Kempton has improved its stands and upgraded catering facilities. It has also increased fixtures from 30 to 54 in the first year and hopes to top 100 days of racing in subsequent years.

"The significant improvements to our facilities and the increased number of fixtures means that we can offer group organisers and coach operators greater flexibility and choice," says Jo Watts, the commercial manager. We have noticed a trend for groups to look for venues that can offer something out of the ordinary.

"The continuing excitement created in recent years by international sporting events such as the Ashes and the buzz surrounding London winning the 2012 Olympic Games, has led to sporting venues becoming more and more popular.

"Unlike other sports such as football and cricket, racing is more than just a spectator sport, with visitors having the opportunity to become involved in the excitement of the race by having a flutter on their favourite horse."

Gate prices for admission to the enclosures range from £10 to £20 - prices rise on some of the big race days - and parties of six or more qualify for a 20% discount. Coach drivers qualify for free admission and a £5 voucher. There is free coach parking.

Kempton Park is easily accessible from the M3, M4 and M25 motorways.

■ Call 01932 782292 or go to *www.kempton.co.uk*

Driving home: a close finish at Kempton Park, which is now all weather

Racing that is fit for a queen

After taking an excursion north to York in 2005, the Royal Ascot meeting returns to its Berkshire home this year after a multi-million pound redevelopment.

The Royal meeting is on from Tuesday to Saturday, June 20 to 25, and group tickets are on sale for the opening day only, when the new Grandstand will be opened officially. The stand is the focal point of the redevelopment and the parasol roof that is suspended on 'structural trees' defines its distinctive design.

Tickets for Royal Ascot have been on sale since the beginning of the year so the chances of them still being available are slight. General tickets on the Tuesday cost £54 (£40 discounted) and those for the Silver Ring are £11 each. Discounted rates apply to groups of 10 or more.

The new season opens on Saturday, May 27 but details have yet to be finalised. Outside of Royal Ascot, there are 14 fixtures to the end of the year and discounts for groups of 10 or more start from £10.50 per person.

The key dates in the calendar include De Beers Diamond Day on Saturday, July 20 when gate admission to the Premier Enclosure is £40 a head, but groups of 10 or more qualify for a discounted rate of £30. General admission is £25 and the group discount is £18.75. The Heath Enclosure is open on Diamond Day only and tickets cost £7, only available on the day.

In the autumn there are three days of top entertainment during the Ascot Festival, which runs from Friday to Sunday, September 22 to 24. Admission to the Premier Enclosure on the opening day is £20 but groups qualify for a £5 discount. General admission is £14 and the group discounted price is £10.50.

On the subsequent days, groups get a discounted rate of £18.75 (normally £25) to the Premier Enclosure and the admission charge is reduced from £15 to £11.25 per person.

Children aged 16 and under are admitted free of charge to meetings, outside of Royal Ascot, and coach drivers qualify for free admission. There is ample free coach parking at most of the meetings.

■ For more information, call 0870 727 1234, or e-mail: *enquiries@ascot.co.uk*

Hereford

Jump to it and book a day out at Hereford racecourse, which stages jumping fixtures through the year. Entrance prices are £13 on weekdays and £15 on weekends but groups of 15 or more qualify for a saving of £2 per head and pay £11 and £13 respectively. There is free coach parking and drivers qualify for free admission.

Groups may also book two packages; The Fancy a Flutter deal costs £25 per head and comprises admission, a racecard, welcome drink, burger meal and £2 Tote voucher. The Classic Raceday package costs £30 a person and comprises admission, a racecard, welcome drink, afternoon tea in the Cider Press Restaurant and a £5 Tote voucher.

The next race meeting is on May 4 and there are other fixtures on May 17, June 4, June 14, June 19, September 28, a Beer and Cider Day on October 15, November 5, November 16, November 28 and a Christmas Festival on December 22 and 23.

■ **For more information, call Hereford racecourse on 01432 273560.**

Yorkshire relish

They like their racing up in Yorkshire so it is fitting that there should be a single organisation to market group opportunities in the county.

Go Racing in Yorkshire promotes nine tracks – Beverley, Catterick, Doncaster, Pontefract, Redcar, Ripon, Thirsk, Wetherby and York – and has details of the special events, such as Ladies Days, that are perfect for a day out. There is no racing at Doncaster this season because the track is undergoing a major renovation programme and its prestige races have been switched to other tracks. The Lincoln Handicap was run at Redcar and the St Leger will be run at York in September (see York information under Classic days out of note).

Starting alphabetically, Beverley is a very attractive track in the East Riding, as we old sons of Yorkshire still refer to it, and offers flat racing through the turf season. Admission to the Members Enclosure is £15 per person for groups of 20 or more, a saving of £2, and rises to £18 on the Ladies Day on August 16. Entry to the Grandstand and Paddock is £12 but groups of 20 or more pay £11. Add another 10 or more people and the rate drops to £10 and goes down to £8 for groups of 60 or more. There is free admission for the group organisers.

Up in the north of the county, Catterick offers groups of six or more £2 off the £15 admission prices to the Club Enclosure and Tattersalls respectively. There are no free badges.

Just a mile or so away from the giant cooling towers at Ferrybridge, punters will find Pontefract racecourse, which stages flat racing from April to October. Parties from 10 to 50 customers will save £1 and pay £17 for Club admission and £11 to get in the Paddock. There is one free place.

Ripon is another attractive venue for flat racing and groups qualify for discounted admission to the Tattersalls enclosure. The gate price is £11 but groups of 20 more qualify for entry at £9 per person. Coach drivers and group organisers are admitted free of charge.

Take the bracing sea air at Redcar and enjoy a day of top-class flat racing. Admission to the Premier Enclosure is £16 (£18 on Feature days), while it will cost £11 to get into the Grandstand (£12 on Feature days). Groups of 10 more qualify for £4 off the admission rates and £1 off entry to the Family Enclosure, whose gates prices are £4 on Standard days and £5 on Feature days. There is one free entry for every 12 paying customers.

Up in James Herriott Country, Thirsk offers groups of 10 or more admission to the Club Enclosure for £15 a head, a saving of £1, and admission to Tattersalls for £11, also a saving of £1 a head. Take more than 100 people and entry to Tattersalls drops to £8.50 a head.

Wetherby holds top jump action through the year – there have been plans to add flat racing – and admission to the Premier Enclosure is £18 on Standard days, £20 on Feature days and £25 on Feature Plus days. Entry to the Grandstand and Paddock is £11 on Standard days, £12 on Feature days and £14 on Feature Plus days. Groups of six or more paying customers qualify for £3 discounts. There is a free £5 Tote betting voucher for the group organiser.

■ For more information about Go Racing in Yorkshire, call 08700 721724.

The field is packed tightly as it corners at Uttoxeter

Beer and Balti in the Midlands

Uttoxeter is one of the most popular tracks in the Midlands and it offers a varied programme of race days through the year. There is a beer festival on May 6, followed by a celebration of Staffordshire towns on May 14 and an Abba Night on May 20. There is family fun on May 28, a ladies night on June 8 and an Irish night on June 15.

The English Summer National is on July 2, there is a Bond evening on July 11 and a summer garden party on July 19.

Other fixtures are on July 27 and 31, September 6 and 17, October 1 and 11, with the Beer and Balti on October 27. The year ends with meetings on November 11, 23, the Christmas racing party on December 15 and a final day on December 31.

Groups of 31 or more people qualify for a discount of £2 on the £19 admission price to the Premier Enclosure and on the £15 ticket to the Grandstand and Paddock. Drivers qualify for free admission and there is free coach parking.

Fancy a Flutter and Classic Raceday packages are also available. The former costs £23 per person and includes Grandstand entrance, a welcome drink, racecard, burger meal and £2 Tote betting voucher. The latter costs £30 a head and includes admission to the Premier Enclosure, a welcome drink, racecard, afternoon tea and a £5 Tote betting voucher.

■ For bookings and more information, call the course on 01889 562561 or visit *www.uttoxeter-racecourse.co.uk*

Classic days out of note

Music and world-class racing combine at Newmarket, the Suffolk track that is the headquarters of British racing. Newmarket stages flat racing from April through to October at the Rowley Mile and July courses, with the Rowley Mile staging the first two classics of the season. The 2000 Guineas is held on Saturday May 6 and the runners in the 1000 Guineas go under starter's orders on Sunday May 7.

The 2006 season kicks off on Tuesday April 18 with the three-day Craven Meeting that always acts as a guide to the horses to watch in the summer. There are various meetings up to June when the action switches to the July Course for the summer meeting before returning to the Rowley Mile for the Cambridgeshire, Cesarewitch and the Champion Stakes in October.

In the summer the July course provides a perfect day out for groups. If the weather is good, they can sit out under the trees and drink Pimms to the sound of steel bands. The highlight feature is the July Festival from July 12 to 14 but there also is a series of Newmarket Nights that combine racing with an evening concert. The line-up for this year comprises racing from 6pm and the Bootleg Beatles on Friday June 23, racing from 6pm and Status Quo on Friday June 30 and McFly rocking the stands on Friday July 21. A week later racing start at 5.45pm and Ronan Keating tops the bill, while Texas headlines on Friday August 4. The season ends with Jools Holland and his Rhythm and Blues Orchestra rounding off an evening of racing on Friday August 11 and Westlife appearing on Friday, August 18. Racing starts at 5.45 and 5.25pm respectively.

Westlife are at Newmarket on Aug 18

Groups of 20 or more qualify for discounts to race meetings if booked at least 14 days in advance. Coach parking is free and drivers qualify for free admission.

■ For more information, call the box office on 01638 675500 or go to *www.newmarketracecourses.co.uk*

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Clean break: quickly out of the stalls at Hamilton Park in Scotland

Rich theme north of the border

Dress to impress on a day out at Hamilton Park, the Scottish track that offers 17 summer fixtures from May to September. All the meetings are themed at Hamilton Park, which is the only Scottish track that offers flat racing exclusively.

The stalls open on Sunday May 7 for the Cancer Research UK Family Day, the first of the Super Six events at the track. Others include the Braveheart Night on Friday May 19, when racing starts at 6.25pm, and Saints and Sinners on Wednesday June 14. Racing starts at 6.45pm on what is one of the social events of the season. There will be live music after the racing at both fixtures and also on Variety Club Night on Saturday August 5. The other Super Six fixtures are John Smith's Fair Friday on Friday July 14 and the Sunday Mail Family Night on Saturday July 15.

Themed racedays include Guys & Dolls on Thursday June 29, All Revved Up on Tuesday July 4 and Stars & Stripes on Wednesday August 16. In all, there are seven themed racedays from Thursday May 11 to Wednesday August 23 and there is a Single Club Enclosure price of £13 per person.

There are discounts for group bookings of 10 to 50 tickets of 20% off the day price and 25% off for bookings of 51 or more tickets. Both discounts are available up to seven days prior to the racing fixture.

As a price guide, buy 10 to 50 tickets to the Saints and Sinners meeting and the prices are £17.60 for entry to the Club Enclosure and £11.20 to the Grandstand. Similar size groups visiting a themed meeting will pay £10.40 a head. Groups of six or more also qualify for a 5 Star package from £16 per head that comprises admission, racecard, Come Racing Guide, a beer or a glass of wine and a £2 Tote betting voucher, There also are packages at certain fixtures that also include a homemade burger or sandwich.

Catering facilities include the Dukes Room Restaurant, Bistro Restaurant and fast food outlets. Packages for the Dukes Room Restaurant cost £50 per person and include a three-course meal and admission to the Club Enclosure. Book early and get a window seat for an additional £10 a head.

Hamilton Park is accessed from the west by leaving the M74 at Junction 5 and taking the Hamilton exit at the roundabout and following the brown signs. From the east, leave the M8/A8 at the Bellshill/East Kilbride A724 exit and follow the signs to the M74 and leave at Junction 5.

■ For bookings, call 01698 283806 or email: *enquiries@hamilton-park.co.uk*

Room for a view: Royal Windsor is in a spectacular setting by the Thames

Right royal time

Enjoy a day near the River Thames by organising a day trip to the picturesque Royal Windsor racecourse. The Berkshire track runs a full programme of fixtures through to November 4 and admission prices are £20 per person to the Club Enclosure, £14 a head to the Grandstand and £6 to the Silver Ring.

Groups of 10 or more paying customers qualify for a discount of £3 per person when booking admission to the Club and Grandstand enclosures. Coach parking is free but there are no concessions for drivers.

Many of the meetings are themed and include a family fun day, Irish night, a ladies night and a festival weekend. There also are special packages that include admission and a picnic hamper. There are discounts for orders of one to nine and more than 10 hampers.

■ **Full details of a group day out at Royal Windsor are available on 01753 498400 or by emailing: *office@windsor-racecourse.co.uk*. Alternatively, go to *www.windsor-racecourse.co.uk***

Peak practice

Wales is advertised as the Big Country and there certainly is plenty to attract groups. William Golden tops and bottoms the principality

Go straight to the top on a tour of Wales and head for Snowdonia, the area around the eponymous mountain that has a wealth of opportunities for a day trip or longer break.

The backdrop of stunning scenery helps to bring out the best of the region and groups may opt for a number of excursions, such as Great Little Train Journeys that takes in the **Talyllyn Railway**, which is the world's first preserved steam railway. Enjoy a scenic journey past waterfalls and woodlands to Nant Gwernol. The lines runs from Tywyn to Abergynolwyn and Nant Gwernol and covers seven-and-a-half miles, including passing the Dolgoch Falls. A round trip takes just over two hours and single and return tickets are on offer to groups of 15 or more paying customers.

For example, adults pay £7.60 and children £3.80 for return trips from Tywyn to Dolgoch Falls and £7.95 and £3.95 respectively from Tywyn to Abergynolwyn. Single tickets for the journey from Tywyn to Nant Gwernol cost £5 for adults and £2.50 for children, while return tickets cost £8.15 and £4.10 respectively, but groups should be advised that the return journey is to Abergynolwyn only. Coach drivers and couriers qualify for free travel.

Freshly made sandwiches and cakes are on sale at the cafes at Tywyn Wharf and Abergynolwyn and Steam and Cream teas are available for parties of up to 30 people. There is ample coach parking at Tywyn and Abergybnolwyn stations, but there is no road access to Nant Gwernol station. Trains run daily until November 5 and the new museum, café and shop will open daily during the winter with trains running for Santa Specials and the daily Boxing Day to January 2 New Year service.

Top that: the snow-covered peak of Snowdon, which is mainly accessible for groups by railway

Bookings are essential for groups of 15 or more and return prices are £7.90 for adults and £3.95 for children.

■ Call 01654 710472.

Then head for fine views of the mountains on the extended **Llanberis Lake Railway**, where bookings are essential for groups of 25 or more and prices are £4 for adults and senior citizens and £2.50 for children. There is a free coach parking and drop-off point.

■ Call 01286 870549.

Finally hit the heights on the **Snowdon Mountain Railway**, which takes passengers the 1,085 metres to the top of the highest mountain in England and Wales. This is the only rack and pinion railway in Britain and rides to the summit are available from mid-May to October. Return tickets cost £13 to £17 for adults and £9 to £11 for children.

■ Call 08700 458 0033.

Other attractions in Snowdonia include **Penrhyn Castle** near Bangor, which is a 19th century neo-Norman building set in 45 acres of gardens. There is a railway and dolls' museum. Admission for groups of 15 or more is £5.50 for adults and pre-booking is essential. There is a drop-off point and coach parking and group meals may be booked.

■ Call 01248 353084.

At **Greenwood Forest Park**, which is in Y Felingheli in Gwynedd, there is family fun in the shape of the longest slide in Wales, plus the chance to shoot a Welsh longbow and ride on the world's first people-powered roller coaster. Booking is essential for groups of 15 or more during holiday periods and prices are £4.25 for adults and £3.65 for children in term time, rising to £5 and £4.25 respectively in school holidays. There is a drop-off point and coach parking. The park is open daily in summer and open to pre-booked groups only in winter.

■ Call 01248 671493.

If you want to find out how tough life was working in the slate industry, head for the **Welsh Slate Museum** in Llanberis. Visitors can watch a 3-D film, visit the quarrymen's cottages and check out the giant waterwheel. Pre-booking is essential for groups of 20 or more and admission is free.

■ Call 01286 870630. ›

Above: Water world, the stunning scenery of Wales is rich in natural features

Going underground to explore King Arthur's Labyrinth

Three attractions in the Dyfi Valley have joined forces to offer coach groups varied days out by going on a journey of discovery by boat, steam and a water-balanced railway. Start off in King Arthur's Labyrinth in Corris where an underground boat ride takes visitors through a network of caverns and tunnels. As they walk through the caverns, tableaux and sound and light are used to tell the stories of floods, battles and dragons. And if you are wondering what Arthur is doing in Wales rather than Western England, the earliest legends are based on the ancient manuscripts of the Mabinogion and claim that, when Arthur was king of Ancient Britain, the language spoken was an early form of Welsh.

Back on the surface, the Labyrinth is set in the grounds of the Corris Craft Centre, the home to 10 craft businesses where items are manufactured and sold. The Bard's Quest

Above: Snowdonia demonstrates why Wales is marketed as 'The Big Country'
Right: In the round: a view of an engine on the Talyllyn Railway

challenges visitors to search for the lost legends hidden in the Maze of Time.

King Arthur's Labyrinth and Corris Craft Centre are open seven days a week from 10am until 5pm from April to October. Winter opening hours vary. Snacks and lunches are available at the Y Crochan restaurant.

Visitors travel into the Labyrinth in groups of up to 20, leaving every 15 minutes, and pre-booked parties are requested to arrive 30 minutes before their departure time. Group admission rates to the Labyrinth and Bard's Quest from April 1 to November 5, 2006 are £5.95 for adults, £5.30 for senior citizens and £4 for children. There is ample coach parking but, on busy days, coaches are directed to nearby areas to avoid them getting caught up in congestion.

An alternative itinerary is a visit to the **Centre for Alternative Technology** near Machynlleth, where groups enter the successful eco centre via water balanced cliff railway. Groups may book special guided tours that explain the work of the centre in renewable energy, eco-building and organic gardening. The centre is also spending £1.5 million on a development scheme that will focus on recycling and feature a dome built from glass bottles.

Afterwards, they can enjoy a snack or meal in the Taste of Wales vegetarian restaurant, which also sells organic beer and wine.

Admission rates for groups of 15 or more people are £7 for adults, £6 for senior citizens and £4 for children from Easter to October 31 2006, dropping to £5 for adults and £4 for senior citizens and children from November 1 to the end of the year.

Drivers are given a restaurant voucher and qualify for free admission. There is ample coach parking but drivers may only approach the centre entrance from the south. If they are arriving from the north via Dolgellau, they must carry on into Machynlleth via the A487 and cross two mini roundabouts to the large roundabout on the edge of town, where they can turn the coach and approach from the south.

After lunch, groups should then head back down to Machynlleth, which is the ancient capital of Wales and was once the home of Owain Glyndwr's parliament. Here they can shop in the market town and visit the open market on Wednesdays.

FACT FILE

Operators who want to mix and match should contact the Dyfi Valley Attractions Co-ordinator, who offers a one stop booking service. It comprises information and group rates for each attraction, booking visits to one or more attractions and help in organizing a familiarisation trip.

■ Contact the co-ordinator c/o King Arthur's Labyrinth, Corris, Machynlleth, Powys SY20 9RF. Tel: 01654 761584 or email: *dyfivalley@hotmail.co.uk*

Groups who want a rest from all the sightseeing should check out one of **Cadwalader's Ice Cream Cafés**. Choose from coffees, shakes, sundaes and pastries at one of the outlets where there is a ten per cent discount for groups of 15 or more.

■ Contact the outlets at Beaumaris on 01248 810361, Caernarfon on 01286 677617, Conwy on 01492 592358, Criccieth on 01766 592358 or Harlech on 01766 7805523.

Down in the south, City breaks are big business and operators looking for an ideal destination should check out Cardiff, the capital of Wales. Tourism is big business in the principality and the regeneration of Cardiff has helped to capture a sizeable slice of the group market.

Cardiff Bay is a symbol of the regeneration of the city and it has been turned into a freshwater lake thanks to the introduction of a barrage. Boat tours leave from Mermaid Quay and Cardiff Waterbus has introduced a new taxi service that operates through the year from the bay to the city centre and Penarth.

Major attractions include the Techniquest Science Discovery Centre, the Goleulong 2000 lightship and the Norwegian Church Arts Centre. Techniquest has a set down and pick-up point and parking for 10 coaches. There also are six long stay bays in Pierhead Street.

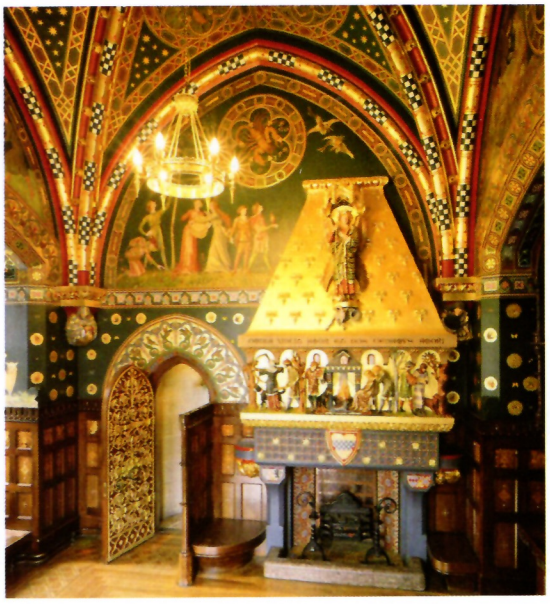
Check out the **Wales Millennium Centre** on Cardiff Bay Waterfront a leading performing arts venue that stages ballet, opera, musicals and contemporary dance. The centre has a dedicated group booking line that offers discounts, helps to arrange tours of the arts centre and provides information on the free daily performances.

■ Call 029 20 634649.

In the city centre, the enduring attraction is **Cardiff Castle**, which dates from Roman times. Guided tours give visitors an insight into how the castle evolved over the years, through the Norman Conquest and medieval occupations to the Bute family, who owned the fortress in the 18th century. The tour also takes in the staterooms and the 12th century castle keep.

Admission prices that include a 50-minute tour of the apartments are £6.95 for adults, £5.40 for senior citizens and £4.30 for children. There are discounts for groups of 20 or more paying customers.

Groups may also arrange specialist tours with the curator, which are suitable for parties with an interest in history or decorative and fine arts. A lecture with slide presentation serves as an introduction to the subject, followed by the curator's own guided tour of the castle interiors. Allow at least two hours for this type of tour, which costs £12 per person and the price is valid until March 31 2007. Morning coffee, a light lunch or afternoon tea can also be added to the specialist tour for an additional charge.



Gold standard: special packages are available for a visit to Cardiff Castle

The castle apartments are not accessible for wheelchair users, although the green, tearooms, education centre and Welsh banquets area can be easily reached. Toilet facilities for disabled visitors are in the grounds. Touch tours can be arranged for pre-booked groups with visual impairments.

Cardiff Castle is open daily except Christmas Day, Boxing Day and New Year's Day. Opening times are from 9.30am to 6pm (last tour at 4.50pm) from March to October. In winter the castle is open from 9.30am to 5pm and the last tour is at 3.45pm. There are coach drop-off points immediately outside the entrance and the nearest coach parks are Sophia Gardens and Civic Centre.

■ For bookings and more information, call 029 2087 8100.

Guiding lights

The North Wales Tourist Guiding Association offers tailor-made tours to suit a wide range of subjects that include culture and heritage and historic towns and cities. Contact Andrew Croxton on 01286 660431 or email: *info@northwalestouristguiding.com*

Special events in 2006 include the Criccieth Festival in June, the Llangollen Eisteddfod and International Snowdon Race in July and the National Eisteddfod of Wales in August. For more information about these and other events, go to *www.gwynned.gov.uk*

A comprehensive accommodation booking service for groups is run by North Wales Tourism and includes properties that range from the coach friendly Celtic Royal in Caenarfon and the George IV in Criccieth to the University of Wales in Bangor, which offers budget accommodation.

Call 08705 168767 or contact the one-stop shop run by the Wales Tourist Board on 0800 3281000.

■ For more details about group visits, call the travel information line on 01286 872702.

Rich seam of heritage

If you are basing your group in and around Cardiff, make sure that you include a visit to the Big Pit National Coal Museum in Blaenavon. This former working mine gives a rare insight into the working life of miners hundreds of feet underground.

Regular tours are conducted by former miners and last just under an hour but allow an additional 20 minutes for being kitted up with helmet and lamp. The tour begins with a 300ft descent by pit cage.

Admission is free and visitors may also tour the original colliery building, including the blacksmith's forge, stables and winding engine house. A 20-minute presentation describes the methods of coal mining through the ages and a virtual guide takes visitors through a simulated mine. The pithead baths have been restored and the baths building is home to an exhibition relating the stories of the people who worked in the mining industry.

■ For bookings and more information call 01495 790311 or email: *bigpit@nmgw.ac.uk*

Combine it with a tour of the Blaenavon Ironworks, which are reputed to be among the best preserved in the world. Guided tours are available and there is on-site coach parking.

■ Call 01495 792615 for more information.

And groups who are visiting in the spring and summer may take a trip on the Pontypool & Blaenavon Railway, which is the remaining track of Wales's highest standard gauge railway. Services run at weekends from Easter to the end of September. There is on-site coach parking.

■ Call 01495 793363.

Rich seam: go underground at the Big Pit World Heritage site

He's a really swell guy

Neil Morrissey is the latest entertainer to show his versatility in the hit musical, **Guys and Dolls**, which is playing to full houses at the Piccadilly. The former *Men Behaving Badly* star is in fine voice as Nathan Detroit and joins a long line of TV stars who have appeared in the production.

Morrissey is scheduled to appear until June 24 and the booking period for the show is running into the autumn.

■ London specialists LHTS is offering overnight packages to **Monty Python's Spamalot**, the New York smash hit that is scheduled to open at the Palace Theatre on October 2.

Lovingly ripped off from the classic film comedy Monty Python and the Holy Grail, Spamalot is the new musical directed by Mike Nichols, the Oscar winning film director, and it recalls the legend of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table. Songs featured include Always Look on the Bright Side of Life.

LHTS is also offering similar packages to **Evita**, which opens at the Adelphi Theatre in June.

Overnight packages to both shows cost £99 per person and comprise top price seats and accommodation in a four star hotel. There is a slight reduction to £85 per person to groups who opt to base themselves in a four star hotel at Heathrow.

■ For more information, call LHTS on 020 7233 5322 (fax: 020 7233 5250).

Neil Morrissey

ADELPHI

Chicago Bonnie Langford is now starring as Roxie Hart in long-running show that transfers to the Cambridge Theatre on April 28.
Booking to: April 22
Box Office: 08704 030303

ALDWYCH

Fame Curtain to come down on this long runner, so this is your final chance.
Booking to: April 22
Box office: 0870 4000 805

APOLLO VICTORIA

Movin' Out Dance show set to the hits of Billy Joel.
Booking to: July 17
Box office: 0870 4000 889

CAMBRIDGE

Dancing in the Street Motown hit parade transfers to the Aldwych on April 27.
Booking to: April 22
Box office: 0870 890 1102

CRITERION

Mack & Mabel David Soul stars in revival of Hollywood musical about love and revenge.
Booking to: July 22
Box office: 0870 060 2313

DOMINION

We Will Rock You Celebrating the music of Queen.
Booking to: October 7
Box office: 020 7413 1165

DRURY LANE

The Producers Corey English and The League of Gentlemen's Reece Shearsmith take over the lead roles from March 20.
Booking to: January 6, 2007
Box office: 0870 890 1109

HER MAJESTY'S

The Phantom of the Opera Lloyd Webber warhorse shows no signs of running out of steam.
Booking to: December 16
Box office: 0870 899 3342

LYCEUM

The Lion King Disney magic brought to the stage in a treat for all the family.
Booking to: March 26, 2007
Box office: 0870 152 1000

NEW LONDON

Blue Man Group Banish the blues by watching this inventive fusion of music and comedy.
Booking to: September 3
Box office: 0870 890 11441

NOVELLO

Footloose Musical based on 1980s film about a boy who moves to a town where dancing is banned.
Booking to: September 9
Box office: 0870 950 0940

PALACE THEATRE

Whistle down the Wind Tim Rogers stars as a man on the run who three children think is Jesus.
Booking: to June 3
Box office: 0870 895 5579

PALLADIUM

Sinatra at the London Palladium Unseen footage accompanied by a big band.
Booking to: October 7
Box office: 0870 890 1108

PHOENIX

Blood Brothers Antony Costa, erstwhile member of boy band Blue, joins cast of this tearjerker.
Booking to: January 27, 2007
Box office: 0870 060 6629

PICCADILLY

Guys and Dolls Neil Morrissey is behaving well and in fine voice as Nathan Detroit until June 24.
Booking to: September 2
Box office: 0870 060 6630

PRINCE EDWARD

Mary Poppins Scarlett Strallen has taken over as the nanny in this enchanting adaptation.
Booking to: April 28, 2007
Box office: 020 7494 5048

PRINCE OF WALES

Mamma Mia! Smash hit Abba-inspired show.
Booking to: January 27, 2007
Box office: 0870 850 0393

QUEEN'S

Les Miserables No glum faces here as the stirring tale has its booking period extended throughout the year.
Booking to: December 16
Box office: 0870 899 3342

ROYAL ALBERT HALL

Showboat Hammerstein and Kern musical about love and prejudice on a paddle steamer. Opens on June 13 with previews from June 10. **Booking to:** June 25
Box office: 020 7589 8212

SAVOY

The Rat Pack Live from Las Vegas Stylish tribute to Frank, Deano and the rest of the gang.
Booking to: May 27
Box office: 0870 164 8787

SHAFTSBURY

Daddy Cool Ex-EastEnder Michelle Collins to star in show based on music of Boney M. Opens on August 15.
Booking to: February 24, 2007
Box office: 020 7379 5399

VAUDEVILLE

Stomp Lots of noise and energetic dancing.
Booking to: October 1
Box office: 0870 890 0511.

VICTORIA PALACE

Billy Elliot Phil Whitchurch plays the bewildered dad in the hit show about the ballet boy.
Booking to: October 21
Box office: 0870 895 5577

Pints of view

Cask and you shall find a way to tap into a brewery that welcomes coach groups. William Golden finds some winners on pints. It's a tough job...

Public houses have played a significant part in my life for more years that I care to remember. I still prefer them as dispensers of alcohol and conversation rather than food and my ideal watering hole would be the kind of establishment featured in Inspector Morse.

Gastro-pubs may be to the fore these days but another welcome trend has been the return of smaller breweries intent on brewing beer like it should be, the perfect antidote to chemical lager.

Groups who want to get on the real ale trail can book a tour to one of these establishments, such as **Woodforde's** that brews Norfolk Ales at the Broadland Brewery in Woodbastwick, Norfolk.

Tours are run from 7pm on Tuesday and Thursday, except during December, and last around 90 minutes. Groups of up to 12 people are charged £60 for the guided tour that takes in the brewing process and the history of the firm. It ends with a sampling session.

Groups of up to 24 people are charged £120 and the coach driver is admitted free of charge. The evening may be rounded off with a meal or snack and more ale in Woodforde's Brewery Tap, the Fur and Feather Inn.

■ All tours must be pre-booked on 01603 722218.

In Cheshire groups who visit the **Unicorn Brewery** in Stockport will discover that it takes 1,760 grains of malt to make a pint of Unicorn and, at 518 feet, the main water well beneath the brewery could accommodate Blackpool Tower.

Visitors learn about 150 years of brewing tradition on a guided tour that ends with the sampling of cask-conditioned ales in the Unicorn Room. Tours are held at 2pm and 7.30pm on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday and are limited to a group maximum of 15 to 20 people. Sampling finishes at 3.30pm on an afternoon tour and at around 9.45pm on an evening tour. There is a non-refundable charge of £6.75 per person and a concessionary price of £3.50 for senior citizens. Finger buffets are available for an additional £4.25 per person.

■ For bookings and more information, call the visits guide organiser on 0161 480 6571 or email: *tours@frederic-robinson.co.uk*

Across the Pennines in York groups can tour **York Brewery**, which is a few minutes walk from the station and close to the major city attractions. Daily guided tours run at 12.30pm, 2pm, 3.30pm and 5pm from Monday to Saturday all year. There are Sunday tours departing at the same times from May to September. All tours include generous beer samplings.

Prices are £4.50 for adults, £4 for senior citizens and £3 for children from 14 to 17. Children under 13 are admitted free but not allowed any sampling.

■ Groups should pre-book by calling 01904 621162. Call the same number for details of evening party tours.

In London **Young's Brewery** in Wandsworth is a living and working museum of English brewing history through the ages. The Brewery Tap runs tours at noon and 2pm from Monday to Saturday and food is available on Saturday from noon to 3pm.

All tours start and finish at the Brewery Tap Visitor Centre at 68 High Street, Wandsworth. Multiple tours are available for larger groups of 40 or more people or tours for groups of 30 or more can run from 6pm. Parties may also hire the pub for the evening.

Standard prices are £5.50 for adults and £4.50 for senior citizens and students. Separate tours of the stables, where the famous Young's drayhorses are housed, are also available.

The Brewery Tap Visitor Centre and souvenir shop are open from 11am to 5pm Monday to Friday and from noon to 5pm on Saturday.

■ For bookings, call 020 8875 7005 or email: *brewerytap@youngs.co.uk*

Above: the home of Shepherd Neame, Britain's oldest brewery Left: take your tour to enjoy a pint of Woodforde's wonderful Wherry in Norfolk

Shepherd Neame is Britain's oldest brewery and the Kent firm has announced that it has invested more than £350,000 in refurbishing the visitor centre in Faversham where groups start and finish tours.

Around 10,000 people a year currently visit Shepherd Neame to discover how famous ales such as Spitfire are brewed and it is predicted that the new visitor experience will help to double that number.

The centre is scheduled to open in May by which time the bar area will have been refurbished to showcase the range of Kentish ales and speciality lagers. Groups will be able to book lunches in advance.

Other new features will include previously unseen documents from the brewery archives, an historic vehicle display and the recreation of an original cooper's shop. There also are plans to install a feature of the brewery's own artesian well, which will allow visitors to taste the pure mineral water used to brew the beer.

The Shepherd Neame tour takes in the brewhouse where visitors can contrast the original 1914 Russian teak mash tuns with the 21st century robotic keg plant. Advance booking is essential for tours for groups of 12 or more people, which depart from the Visitor Centre at 11 Court Street, Faversham, from Monday to Friday. They cost £6 for adults, £5.50 for senior citizens and £4.50 for accompanied children from 12 to 17. A tour with a tutored tasting and a beer and glass gift pack costs £13.50 per person.

Evening tours and sampling sessions are available for groups of 15 or more from Monday to Thursday. The tour ends with a tutored tasting and finger buffet and costs £12.25 per person, reduced to £11.50 for parties of 25 or more.

Other options for groups include weekend tours and tastings, which are on various dates through the year from May to early December. Many of them are timed to coincide with various events in the town.

Groups may also combine a brewery tour with a visit to other local attractions. For example, a tour that combines the brewery and the history of Faversham is available from Monday to Friday and on selected weekends and is available for groups of 12 or more. The cost is £9.50 for adults, £9 for senior citizens and £8 for children from 12 to 17. Also available is a tour that combines the brewery and Mount Ephraim Gardens, punctuated by a two-course lunch in a 15th century pub. The inclusive price is £18.45 for adults, £17.95 for senior citizens and £14.45 for children from 14 to 17.

■ For bookings and more information, call 01795 542016 or go to *www.shepherdneame.co.uk*. For more information about events in Faversham, go to *www.faversham.org*

The enthusiasts

Operators looking to get more business from brewery tours – which are a natural fit for the coaching product – should start by talking to the local Campaign for Real Ale (CAMRA).

Well-organised, CAMRA has a huge number of regional groups which regularly set up 'pub crawls' via public transport, often using the existing bus services. Visits to breweries and distilleries further afield would be very tempting.

Beer festival visits are a good place to start. The Great British Beer Festival at Earl's Court, London runs from August 1-5. Get details from *www.gbbf.org.uk* or by calling 01727 867201.

It's much easier to sell your excursion through a CAMRA branch than a hit-or-miss newspaper advert. Find all the CAMRA branches on its website, *www.camra.org.uk*

Get a taste of the lakes

Any coach group checking out the coach friendly Eden Valley (see page 24) could make a detour to Cockermouth and visit **Jennings Brewery**. It was established as a family concern in the village of Lorton in 1828 and moved to Cockermouth in 1874.

Tradition is the key to its brewing methods and pure Lakeland water is still drawn from the brewery's own well. The company's bestselling brand is Cumberland Ale, which has a delicate hop character, while Jennings Bitter is a darker beer. Other favourites include Cocker Hoop and Sneck Lifter. For those who are not *au fait* with Lakeland dialect, sneck means door latch and a sneck lifter was a man's last sixpenny piece that would enable him to lift the latch of the pub door and buy a pint and then hope that he would meet a friend who would buy him another beer.

Groups with more than sixpence each ›

to their name can go on a tour of Jennings Brewery at 11am or 2pm daily from Monday to Saturday in April, May, June, September and October. Tours run seven days a week in July and August when additional tours may be available depending on demand. In January and February and November and December, tours are held at 2pm only from Monday to Saturday. Evening tours are also available for groups by arrangement.

The guided tours give groups an insight into how real ales are brewed and finish with tastings in the Old Cooperage bar. There also is an on-site shop where visitors can buy ales, leisurewear and other gifts. The shop is open from 9am to 5pm during the week, from 10am to 4pm on Saturday and from 10am to 4pm on Sunday in July and August.

Guided tours cost £4.95 for adults and £2 for children aged 12 and above. The rate includes sampling three halves of beer and the tour lasts approximately 90 minutes. Sensible footwear is advised as several stairs and gridded walkways are negotiated.

■ For bookings and more information call Jennings Brewery on 0845 129 7190 or email: *jenningsbreweryshop@wdbbrands.co.uk*

Work up a thirst on your tour by seeing the traditional methods used to brew Britain's finest ales

Coors and effect

If you are organising a group day out in Hampshire, check out the **Coors Brewery** in Alton. Your groups can make it Three's Company by combining a visit to the brewery with Mid-Hants Railway or Milestones, the county's living history museum.

Alton Brewery is the home of Carling, Grolsch and Worthington and groups of 15 to 50 people can enjoy a guided tour that takes them from the first grain through to the kegging process. It also enables them to compare old and new technology. The tour ends with a sampling and a finger buffet or supper. Visits can last up to three hours.

Milestones captures a view of life in Hampshire between 1850 and 1945. An indoor authentic town recreates the everyday lives of people at home and at work. Visitors step back in time into a network of streets where they meet characters in period costume. On-site facilities include a café that serves tea and cakes and hot and cold meals. The museum accommodates groups of 15 or more people and a full tour can take up to three hours.

Alternatively, your groups can opt for a nostalgic train ride on the Mid-Hants Railway, or Watercress Line as it is known. The journey takes them through 10 miles of Hampshire countryside and they can enjoy the various changes in the seasons. Special offers include group lunches or afternoon cream teas. The offers apply to groups of 15 or more and there is coach parking at Alresford station.

Prices start from £13 per person for a combined tour. For more details about how to book contact:

Coors Brewery Manor Park, Alton, Hampshire GU34 2PS. Tel: 01420 520158
Email: *alton@coorsvisitorcentre.com*

Milestones Leisure Park Churchill Way West, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6YR. Tel: 01256 477766. Email: *linda.owen@hants.gov.uk*

Mid-Hants Railway The Railway Station, Alresford, Hampshire SO24 9JG. Tel: 01962 733810. Email: *info@watercressline.co.uk*

Hook Norton brews some delightful beers

Hooked on beer

In the heart of the Oxfordshire, not far from Banbury, groups will find the Hook Norton Brewery. The visitor centre is housed in the original maltings that John Harris bought in 1849 and where he commenced brewing.

Brewery tours cost £8.50 a head and are available from Monday to Friday. They last approximately two hours. They include visits to the brewery and village museums, samplings and a badged glass as a memento. The shop and museum are open from 8.30am to 5pm from Monday to Friday, including bank holiday Mondays, and on Saturday in December.

The building is a traditional tower brewery with six storeys and several flights of steep stairs, so visitors are requested to wear sensible shoes. The brewery itself is not suitable for disabled visitors but they are able to access the shop and visitor centre reception area.

■ For more information about timing and availability, call the visitor centre on 01608 730384 or email: *heritage@hook-norton-brewery.co.uk*

See ewe at the baa

Flock to the market town of Masham in North Yorkshire and sign up for a daytime 'Shepherded' tour of the **Blacksheep Brewery**. It comprises a 60-minute tour around the brewhouse and fermenting room and ends with a half-pint of beer. Rates for pre-booked groups from 15 to a maximum of 120 people cost £4.25 for adults, £3.25 for senior citizens and £2.25 for children.

If you want to visit in the evening, there are packages available on Thursday, Friday and Saturday. The cost is £14.95 per person and comprises a brewery tour, two halves of beer or a glass of house wine and a hot supper dish in the bistro. A Shepherded tour that includes a two-course meal is on offer for £19.95 a head. Pudding may be added to both meal options for an extra £3.50 per cover.

Drivers heading into Masham should enter over the bridge and then bear left into the town centre in order to turn around in the market square. They should then follow the same road back out but take a left at the top of the hill where the road forks.

Coaches should then traverse the crossroads and follow the road past the White Bear pub and Black Sheep works entrance and take the next right into the visitor centre car park.

■ For bookings and more information, contact the visitor centre on 01765 680101.

Garden of Eden

A little known corner of England is the latest and deserved winner of a coach friendly award, as William Golden discovers

Everybody in coach tourism is keen to improve standards, so the Confederation of Passenger Transport is to be congratulated for its initiative in awarding honours to towns and cities in the UK who actively promote themselves to the industry.

This year's winner of the CPT's Coach Friendly Local Authority Award was Eden Valley, an area in the east of the Lake District that comprises the four market towns of Appleby-in-Westmoreland, Alston, Kirkby Stephen and Penrith.

It is best known for its natural assets such as the River Eden, Ullswater and mountains such as Helvellyn, which can be combined with manmade attractions such as boat rides on the lake and Rheged.

The award is the first to be awarded by the CPT to a district council and it marks the way that the people in the area have pulled together to offer a warm welcome to coach groups.

Ella Langan, the chairman of Eden District Council, said: "We recognise that coach trade can bring considerable business to our many shops, restaurants and visitor attractions.

"We aim to continue to improve our facilities and services to boost our economy by increasing the number of visitors to Eden using this environmentally-friendly mode of transport."

A visit to Eden Valley will demonstrate why it's the CPT's latest award-winner

Itineraries on offer in Eden

Tourism officials in the area will be happy to suggest itineraries that should help groups to get a real flavour of the Eden Valley.

For example, Penrith Pots and Plumage starts with a visit to Wetheriggs Country Pottery followed by a morning stroll around the market town of Penrith. Attractions include the Penrith Museum, the ruins of the castle and there is market every Tuesday and a farmers' market on the third Tuesday of each month. After lunch, leave for Eden Ostrich World.

Miniatures, Mountains and a Mirrored lakes is a tour that begins with a 10am visit to Lilliput Lane (01768 212692), which is known for its miniature models of cottages, castles and other buildings. The visitor centre is housed in a full-sized version of Honeysuckle Cottage, one of the original models. There also are gardens, a shop and tearoom. From there head on to finish the morning with a visit to Rheged and after lunch, take to the water for cruise organised by Ullswater Steamers.

A third itinerary option is Discover the North Pennines. This is centred on travelling along the A686, which has been voted as one of the AA's top 10 most scenic routes and takes groups firstly to The Village Bakery at Melmerby (01768 881811). The bakery is known for its organic breads and cakes baked in wood-fired ovens. Allow 45 minutes for a coffee break in the restaurant and stock up on freshly cooked produce.

Then it is time to head for Nenthead Mines – Heritage Centre (01434 382037), which is one of the main lead mining sites in the North Pennines. Features include interactive displays that show how lead and zinc were mined and a walk across the top of a 100 metre deep shaft. The centre is open from April to October and groups should allow up to two hours for a visit.

In the early afternoon, your group will arrive at South Tynedale Railway for a one-hour nostalgic return train ride. The tour is rounded off by a visit to Acorn Bank Garden (01768 361893), a National Trust property with a walled garden of 250 species of culinary and medicinal herbs. There also are orchards with shrubs, herbaceous plants and roses.

WHERE TO GO, WHAT TO SEE

Rheged

Learn about the spirit of Cumbria on a visit to this village in the hillside. The award-winning attraction is very coach-friendly and offers groups a range of packages.

Rheged is an all-weather destination that has at its centrepiece a cinema screen as big as six double-decker buses, on which four films are shown daily. The most popular is Rheged - The Movie, which gives you a bird's eye view of the Lake District as you discover its myths and legends.

Other attractions include the National Mountaineering Exhibition, 12 shops, two cafés and a restaurant and an indoor play area.

There is a full programme of special events through the year, including craft fairs, a food and drink festival and live music. Groups may combine one of these with a visit and also book a film and meal package. This comprises a two-course lunch followed by giant movie of your choice or entry to the National Mountaineering Exhibition.

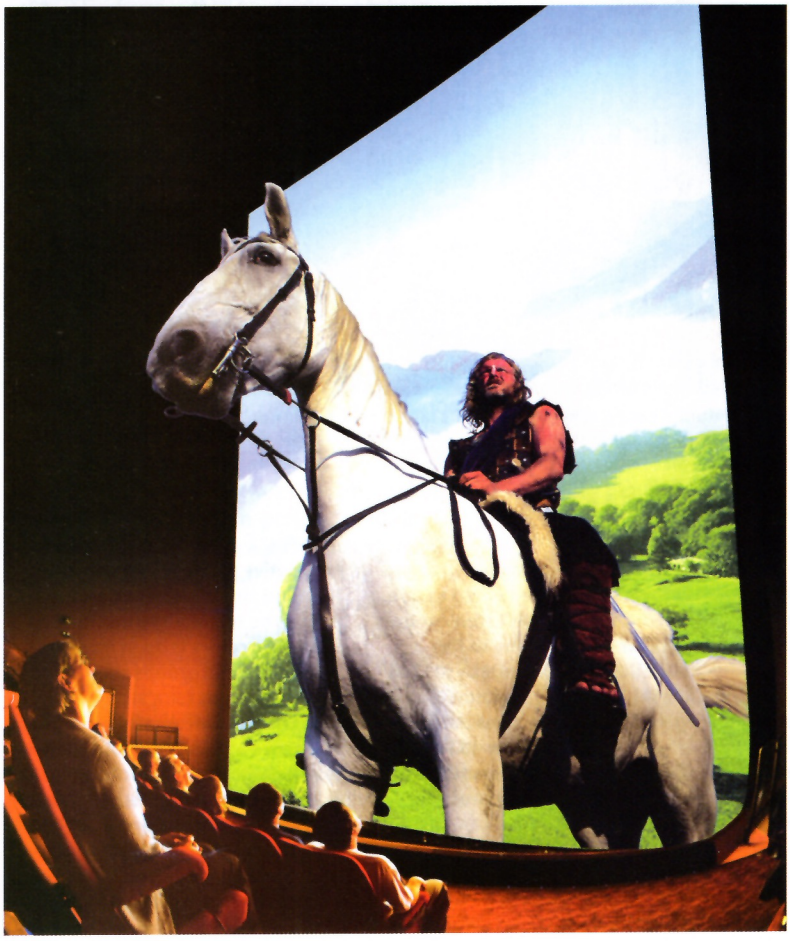
Groups may also combine a cruise on Ullswater Steamers with lunch or afternoon tea in Rheged's Reivers Restaurant.

Entry to the building is free and there are special discounts to the attractions for groups of 10 or more and priority entry for pre-booked parties that includes a meet-and-greet service.

There is free coach parking and a set-down and pick-up point outside the entrance. There are incentives and free movie admission for drivers. Exclusive evening entertainment such as a celtic banquet is available by arrangement.

The building has disabled access to all levels, modified toilets and Shopmobility scooters that can be booked in advance.

Rheged is open daily from 10am to 5.30pm throughout the year, except Christmas Day. ■ For more information, call 01768 860019 or email: *groupvisits@rheged.com*



The past comes to life in Rheged – The Movie

Your groups can meet some feathered friends at Ostrich World

Eden Ostrich World

Since opening its doors to the public at Easter 1998, Eden Ostrich World has quickly established itself as a destination that combines education and entertainment.

It is a farm visitor centre based at Langwathby Hall, a 230-acre working farm, near Penrith and boasts rare breeds of cattle, donkeys, pigs and goats alongside meerkats, zebras, porcupines and racoon dogs.

The centrepiece is the African Black Ostrich and visitors can view egg hatching on a daily basis from May to October.

Conservation is also a major factor and Eden Ostrich World features dry stone-walling, hedge planting and laying and tree planting. Afterwards visitors can enjoy a walk along the River Eden.

The visitor centre is open daily and there is on site coach parking.

Groups are welcome by prior arrangement and the on-site tearoom serves meals and snacks.

■ For bookings and more information, call 01768 881771 or email: *enquiries@ostrich-world.com*

Wetheriggs Country Pottery

Groups can get creative at this venue near Penrith, where they can quickly get down to business and try their hand at pottery. Pots of Fun is a creativity centre and the options include throwing clay, trying your hand at painting a figurine or bowl or mug and creating a mosaic on glass.

It is one of a number of elements at Wetheriggs that makes the centre an ideal destination for a visit. The original pottery dates from the 1860s and Mary Chappelhow now makes traditional pottery on the site within her own business, Interlude Ceramics. The pottery was restored in 1994 and the late Fred Dibnah restored the steam engine in 1995. The original Beehive kiln forms part of the museum exhibition that shows the different styles of pottery produced over the years.

Admission to Wetheriggs is free and groups are urged to book places in advance at Pots of Fun so that space can be set aside for them to get down to work. Another attraction is the Yam Café, where advance notice can ensure that a special menu is prepared so that lunch is ready on arrival. Drivers qualify for a free meal.

There also is a rare breeds centre and a gift and seconds shop.

Wetheriggs Country Pottery is at Clifton Dykes four miles south of Penrith. Follow the brown signs from Junction 40 of the M6 and the A6.

■ Call Simon at Pots of Fun on 01768 892260 or Paul at the Yam Café on 01768 899121.

Warm welcome to the town

It is not every day that the mayor comes out in his regalia to welcome coaches to the town, but that is the situation in Appleby-in-Westmorland.

The current mayor Frank Harland, his mayoress Alice Palmer and Stan Rooke, the deputy mayor and mayor designate, have been welcoming parties into the Moot Hall where they enjoy a short history of the ancient royal town.

Coach drivers may arrange these tours direct by calling Mr Harland on 01768 351868. The town also has a traditional market every Saturday and its main attraction is the St Lawrence's Church, which is known as the 'Cathedral of the Dales'. A horse fair is held in the town every June and there is a jazz festival in July.

Alston has cobbled streets and plenty of craft shops, cafés and restaurants. Kirkby Stephen has a 13th century parish church and plenty of antique shops. It is an ideal stopover for refreshments as it boasts plenty of inns and cafes. Penrith has a thriving market and is an ideal base for visiting the area. There is a fine array of speciality shops.

South Tynedale Railway is England's highest narrow gauge railway

South Tynedale Railway

Let the train take the strain on a scenic ride along the South Tynedale Railway in Alston. The attraction, run by the South Tynedale Railway Preservation Society, is England's highest narrow gauge railway and operates between Alston and Kirkhaugh from April to October. Trains run on selected days except in July and August when there are daily services, except on July 3, 7, 10 and 14.

Steam trains will run on selected days through the season and there will be other special events include a Teddy Bears' Picnic on June 24 and 25, Halloween Specials on October 28 and 29 and a season of Santa Specials.

Return fares for pre-booked groups of 10 or more are £4 for adults and £2 for children. There is parking for two coaches at Alston station from which all services run because there is no road access to Kirkhaugh station. Alston has full toilet facilities, including for the disabled, but there are none at Kirkhaugh. There are limited buffet facilities at Alston, which are not operated by the railway, and a buffet coach on the train.

■ For group bookings, call John Wilks on 01435 381696.

While at South Tynedale, groups may visit the Alston Model Railway Centre, which also has a shop and a hands-on layout for children. Admission is £1.75 for adults and 75p for children. The centre is open from Easter to the end of October. Call 01434 382100.

The Hub of the North Pennines Museum is opposite the station and is a transport and heritage centre that depicts the past through a collection of photographs, memorabilia and vintage cars and motorcycles. Admission is £1 for adults and free for children under 16. It is open at weekends from Easter to Christmas and daily from 11am to 5pm from June to the end of September.

■ Go to *www.alston-hub.org.uk*

Ullswater Steamers

Take to the water and enjoy a leisure cruise through stunning scenery by booking a group trip on one of the vessels operated by Ullswater Steamers. A fourth vessel is joining the fleet in July and the company operates one and two-hour cruises all-year round, except for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day.

Timetables vary according to the year and the services are from Glenridding to Houghton and Pooley Bridge and Houghton to Pooley Bridge. Groups get spectacular views of Helvellyn and the Pennines. There is coach parking available at the Pier House at Glenridding.

■ For more information, contact Ullswater Steamers on 01768 482229.

Stunning Ullswater – home of Ullswater Steamers

TOURIST INFORMATION CENTRES

Alston, Town Hall. Tel: 01434 382244. Email: *alston.tic@eden.gov.uk* Open daily from Easter to October and mornings, excluding Sunday or Tuesday, during winter.

Appleby-in-Westmorland, Moot Hall, Boroughgate. Tel: 01768 351090. Email: tic@applebytown.org.uk. Open daily from Easter to October and seasonal opening during the winter.

Kirkby Stephen, Market Square. Tel: 01768 371199. Email: *ks.tic@eden.gov.uk* Open daily from Easter to October and mornings (not Sunday) during winter.

Penrith, Robinson's School, Middlegate. Tel: 01768 867466. Email: *pen.tic@eden.gov,uk* Additional group visit information is available at *www.cumbria4coaches.com* or *www.visiteden.co.uk*

COACH PARKING

Alston
Set down: Hendersons Garage, Townfoot and top of Front Street near the fire station, thereby avoiding hill climb for passengers. Parking: South Tynedale railway station. Toilets next to the town hall
Charge: Free

Kirkby Stephen
Set down: Bus stop in Market Street, adjacent to the sports and social club.
Parking: Auction Mart in Faraday Road behind Market Street. Not available on Tuesday afternoons. Other events also take place so check availability on 01768 371385. Toilets in town centre. Charge: Free

Appleby-in Westmorland
Parking: Town centre, Market Square. Limited to 90 minutes. Open 24 hours. Sands coach park. Stay limited to two hours. Toilets near both parks
Charge: Free

Penrith
Parking: Southend Road Outer and Sandgate car parks. Toilets at both sites. Close to town centre amenities.
Charge: Free

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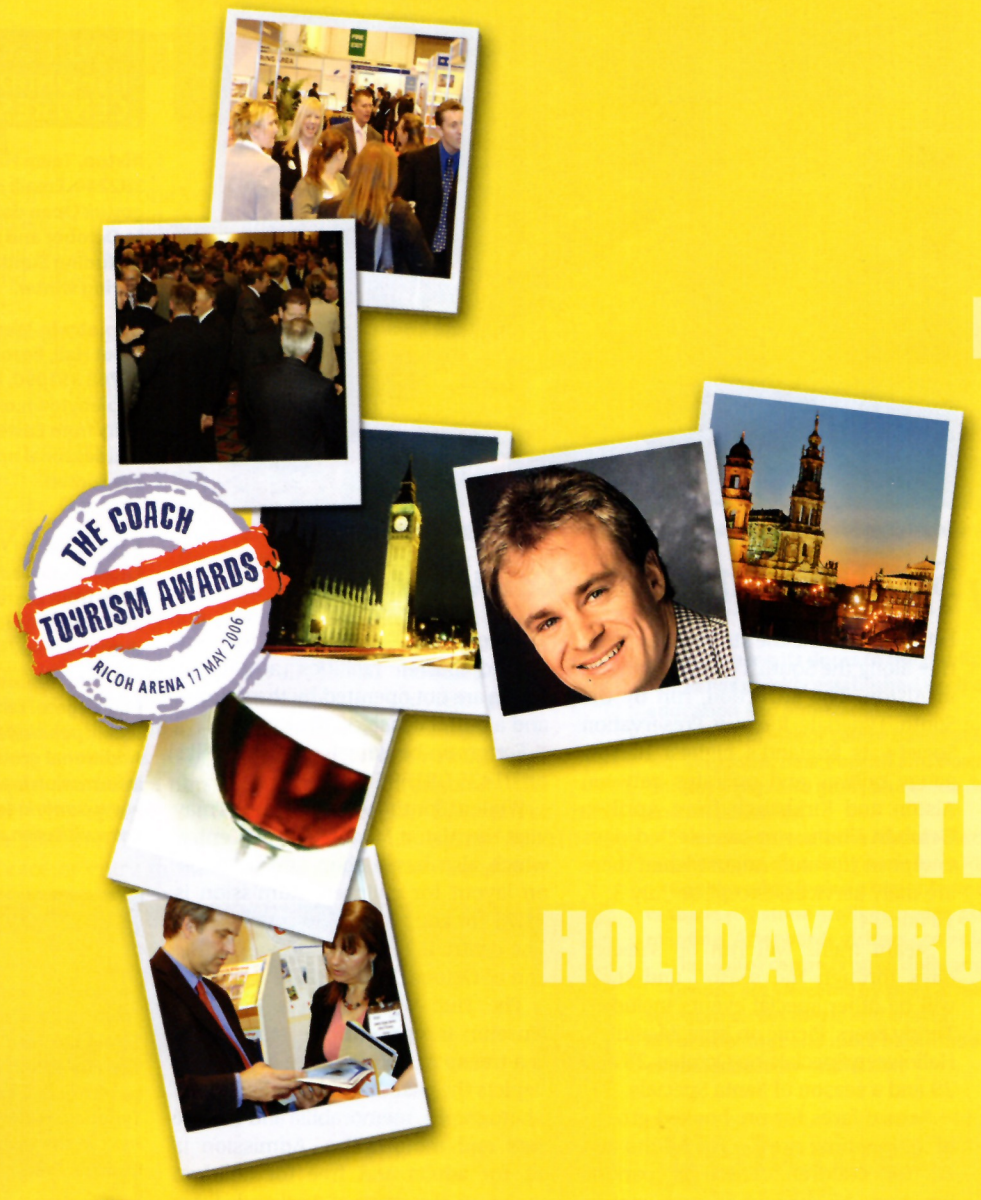

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Expo Management are the new organisers of the Coach Tourism show, which is full of exciting opportunities to help your business fulfil it's potential. Free seminars will be taking place over the two days, and will cover high profile issues such as the London Emission Zone legislation, the threat or opportunity of Low Cost Airlines and also how the new Drivers' Hours legislation, due to take affect from May 2007, will affect you and your business. All seminar subjects will be discussed by key note speakers who work within the coach tourism market. If this is not enough, this years show will also see the launch of the first ever Coach Tourism Awards, which makes Coach Tourism 2006 the place to be on the 17th & 18th May.

Register free on www.coachtourism.com or call our team on +44 (0) 870 389 2903.

The **Coach Tourism Awards** is the first of it's kind and will launched at this years show on the evening of the first day at the impressive Ricoh Arena, Coventry.

The Evening will consist of 14 Awards which will be staggered between a four course dinner, followed by top comedian Bobby Davro.

The awards will play a big part in promoting the Coach Tourism show both inside and outside the industry and will be a great night for those wanting to make the most out of the event and get some great contacts for their business.

For more information visit: www.coachtourism-awards.com or call us direct on +44 (0)870 389 2903.

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Booked to the Hilt

Special rates for groups through March 31, 2007 were announced by Hilton Hotels at British Travel Trade Fair 2006 at the beginning of last month. The rates cover properties across the UK and include Northern Ireland.

Operators looking for a base in London should check out the Hiltons in Islington and Euston, which offer bed and breakfast for £49 per person per night for Monday to Thursday arrivals until March 31. The rate drops to £40 per night from Friday to Sunday. The Islington price includes continental breakfast and it is a full English at the Euston hotel.

If you want to base your group in the Hilton in London's Docklands, the tariff is £52 from Monday to Thursday, dropping to a very affordable £38 a head from Friday to Sunday. Prices are on request until March 31.

Groups heading north may stay in the York Hilton for £60 per night on a dinner, bed and breakfast basis through the week, while those who head for the bright lights of Blackpool will pay £45 for half-board accommodation from Monday to Thursday. Add £3 a night for Friday to Sunday stays and £10 during the Illuminations.

Above: Room service: guests enjoy a high standard of comfort. Top: Flying the flag: check out the group rates at Hilton hotels across the UK

In Scotland, there are properties in Edinburgh and Glasgow, making ideal bases for city breaks. Prices start at £50 for half-board accommodation at the Hilton at Edinburgh airport from Monday to Thursday until October 31. The Friday to Sunday rate is £47 a night. There is a £10 supplement for stays in August 10. From November 1 to March 31 the rates are £47 and £36 respectively.

In the south of England, the Hilton in Bath has half-board rates for £55 per night through the week until October 31. From November 1 to March 31, the prices drop to £45 from Monday to Thursday and £48 at weekends (£10 reduction on Sunday).

All rates quoted are per person per night, based on sharing a twin or double room with private facilities. There is one free single room for a minimum of 20 paying customers and a free twin or double room for 50 paying customers. Single room supplements apply to a maximum of five single rooms per group of 50 people. Single rooms are available pro rata to the number of twins booked and supplements range from £15 to £30 depending on location.

■ For more information, call Hilton group bookings on 0845 709 0505 (fax 0141 304 1226) or go to *www.hilton.co.uk*

Special offers in Bournemouth

Britannia Hotels has added a hotel in Bournemouth to its portfolio of 30 hotels in 2006 and is offering special introductory rates.

The Britannia Bournemouth, formerly the New Ambassador, has an indoor swimming pool and entertainment throughout the season. It is close to the resort's major attractions and an ideal base for a short break or longer tour.

Book early and groups qualify for half-board rates from £21 per person in the low season and from £32 in the high season, subject to availability.

Britannia has hotels in cities including Newcastle, Manchester, Birmingham and Liverpool.

■ Check dates and availability on 0845 838 1212 (fax 0845 838 1289) or email: *grouptravel@britanniahotels.com*

Meal appeal at Best Western

Meal stops at more than 110 Best Western properties from Cornwall to the Highlands are on the menu for coach groups who want a break on a day out or touring holiday.

The hotel group has introduced the offer for the first time this year and options range from a two-course set lunch at £8 per person, a three-course set lunch at £9.95 and a three-course, three choice lunch for £12.50 a head. Starters include soup, pate and prawn cocktail, while main courses include a regional dish of the day and fish or vegetable bake.

Many of the hotels have on-site coach parking and tea and coffee is included in the meal price at a number of properties.

■ For bookings and more information, call 0870 169 1001 or email: *groupmeals@bestwestern.co.uk*

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OPTARE SLIMLINE SOLO

One of Sleafordian's two Slimline Optare Solos, which operate on a local authority-sponsored service in Sleaford – called the IT – or 'into town'

So far, so good

Sleafordian tells us how its pair of Slimline Optare Solo midibuses are getting on

Owner's comments: Managing director Mark Broughton said: "There isn't much to complain about really. Most faults are with third-party suppliers - such as the CCTV system and the Almex ticketing equipment. They've been pretty good overall and we are quite impressed. We went for the Cummins engine option to make sure they had adequate performance but you pay a real penalty in fuel consumption. Average over the last 12 months for JWP has been 9.33mpg and JWU has only managed 9.11mpg. I was hoping for much better than that."

Engineer's comments: Chief engineer Phil Kerr said: "Apart from repairing one of the wings after a slight accident in town there hasn't been a great deal to worry us. They seem to get through quite a few 'P' clips from the wiring harness, especially round the Telma, and the rear propshaft is very difficult to get at to grease it. We almost got a year out of the tyres but we do suffer a bit with drivers scuffing them up the kerbs. It's something you have to live with because of Sleaford's narrow streets."

Driver's comments: Driver Fred Massam said: "These are great for this sort of job, You can pretty much put them anywhere, they are comfortable and give a good, stable ride. I've not heard one passenger complaint since we started the service. There's a few minor changes would make the Solo a bit more driver friendly. Larger mirrors would help, and a dark section to the top of the windscreen and side window to keep the sun out of your eyes would be good."

FACT FILE

Chassis/ Body Optare Slimline Solo 9.2m
First registered 1 March 2005
Owner Sleafordian, Sleaford, Lincs
Major modifications None
Current mileage JWP – 58,986km, JWU – 58,658km
Cost £110,431 including retrofitted tachograph, stainless steel exhaust with particulate trap and CCTV system

PROS & CONS

Costs last 12 months:
Total £550
Service interval: 6 weeks
Major bills (over £100): Front windscreen.
Average mpg: 9.33/9.11mpg
Breakdowns: None

- ☺ Power and comfort
- ☺ Reliable
- ☺ Attractive to passengers
- ☺ Drivers like Solo
- ☹ Fuel consumption higher than expected
- ☹ Rear prop-shaft inaccessibility
- ☹ Fragile windscreens
- ☹ Small mirrors

Current condition

Panels and bodywork
★★★★★
Still in excellent condition

Seats and flooring
★★★★★
Virtually as new

Driver area
★★★★★
As new

Engine and gearbox
★★★★☆
Fuel consumption high

Key

☺ Positive points
☹ Negative points

★★★★★ Excellent
★★★★☆ Very good
★★★☆☆ Good
★★☆☆☆ Poor
★☆☆☆☆ Very poor

Have you taken delivery of a new vehicle and want to tell the world about it? Email all the details and pictures to *jack.thorpe@rouncymedia.co.uk* or write to the address on page 3

EARNSIDE COACHES

Earnside Coaches of Perthshire has taken delivery of a Volvo B12B Berkhof which is already busy on its extensive schedule of European tours.

The family-run firm based its decision on the many good reports they had heard about the performance of the B12B.

"We had heard from others in the industry that the fuel economy was very good and that's important to us," explained David Rutherford, a partner in the company.

"Since we took the vehicle in September last year its performance has been excellent so it's been a good decision."

Passenger comfort was another major factor for a vehicle which is mainly used for trips to the European ski resorts and to Portugal, Spain, Italy and Croatia on behalf of a number of tour operators, and the highly specified B12B certainly doesn't disappoint.

The 49-seater features a Volvo DH12 420bhp engine coupled to an I-Shift gearbox, which is proving a popular combination with the drivers, promoting both ease of driving and a smooth journey for customers.

The vehicle also has full climate control, toilet, TV/DVD and hot and cold drink-making facilities.

"Undertaking a significant amount of European tours, Volvo's service and back-up support was another significant feature for us," continued Mr Rutherford.

"Having that peace of mind, together with the high vehicle performance and standards of comfort, makes all the difference."

FACT FILE

Chassis/body Volvo B12B Berkhof
Engine Volvo DH12 420bhp
Transmission I-Shift
Seats 49
Spec TV/DVD, toilet, drinks
Bought from Volvo Coach Sales 01509 217700

LAWMANS

Lawmans of Kettering has taken delivery of two new Van Hool Alizee T9 Alicron coaches.

The Northamptonshire-based firm's new 12m coaches feature reclining seats with leather headrest inlay and piping, aircraft-style doors to luggage racks and demountable sunken washroom with continental door. Lawman's orange and green livery is set off by alloy wheels.

Lawmans has been operating for almost 15 years, with a broad based business ranging from operating the local school run to long distance European touring.

The firm is no stanger to the Volvo/Van Hool combo and is particularly keen on the I-Shift gearbox and fuel consumption which transport manager Julian Lawman describes as 'fantastic'.

FACT FILE

Chassis/body Volvo B12B Van Hool Alizee T9 Alicron
Engine Volvo 420bhp
Transmission I-Shift
Seats 49/53
Spec TV/DVD, air con, fridge
Bought from Moseley (PCV) Ltd 01977 609000

ISLEWORTH COACHES

London-based Isleworth Coaches has taken delivery of a new Volvo B7R to accommodate its growing private hire business.

The Sunsundegui-bodied vehicle, which sports alloy wheels, also features the Volvo D7C seven litre rear engine coupled to a ZF six speed automatic gearbox. Inside, the 57 seats all have three point seat belts and passengers benefit from full climate control and a TV/video.

The vehicle joins the firm's 12-strong fleet specialising in school work and other private hire contracts in and around London, one of their major customers being the Metropolitan Police.

"We had not bought Volvo for a while," said General Manager Robin Waller, "but felt that the B7R was right for our requirements. It looks stylish, the passengers are very comfortable and we are very pleased with its performance. Our vehicles are out around London all day every day, so reliability is essential and we get that from Volvo.

"What's more our drivers absolutely love it - and it's vital we keep them happy!"

FACT FILE

Chassis/body Volvo B7R/ Sunsundegui
Engine Volvo D7C
Transmission ZF six speed automatic
Seats 57
Spec Three point seat belts, climate control, TV/video, alloy wheels
Bought from Volvo Coach Sales 01509 217700

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ftr future travel for York

The ftr is coming

Four weeks before the ftr goes into service, Wrightbus and First Group invite *CBW* to experience the vehicle up close. So what is it? A bus, a tram, the best of both worlds? Andrew Peace reports

Cynics decry the ftr as nothing more than a sheep in wolf's clothing – a sci-fi body plonked on a run-of-the-mill bus chassis. It is no secret that underneath the sleek 'fuselage' lies a regular Volvo B7LA bendy-bus chassis.

Industry naysayers are one thing, but it's the reaction from car-loving potential customers that worries First and Wrights. Passengers promised the next generation in public transport will not be fooled by a bus in fancy dress for long. With patronage in general decline, both companies – and by extension, the entire industry – need this concept to work.

A day at the Wrightbus' factory in Ballymena, Northern Ireland, and an insight into the engineering effort that has gone into the vehicle calms initial fears. Ftr is not a confidence trick, it is a comprehensively developed vehicle that owes little to its service bus relatives. ›

Top: Not your average bus. The ftr casts a striking figure. Above: The interior has more of a train look to it – all part of the plan. Below, ftr designer Paul Blair

CHASSIS

A B7LA chassis it might be, but it has been modified - by both Volvo and Wrights - to the point that its underpinnings deserve to be called bespoke.

The most obvious change is at the rear. On the standard B7LA the radiator is stacked on top of the engine in the near-side rear corner, blanking out half the rear window. For the ftr, the Wrights' designers wanted a full rear screen, so the radiator, and intercooler, have been detached, turned 90 degrees, and placed on the roof.

The engine - the first 40 ftrs have the Volvo D7C 275bhp Euro III engine, the rest will have the Euro IV version - still fills the corner, but only to seat-top height.

The other major change is at the front, where the overhang is cut down massively. Passengers enter behind the wheelarch, to eliminate the bottleneck at the front of the bus.

Only the driver is in front of the wheelarch, isolated from the passengers by a full-width dark-tinted perspex wall, and he sits directly on top of the axle.

> "Around 85% of the material content of the ftr is made of easily recyclable metals and plastics"

Underneath the nose lies a special space frame, welded to the top of the wheelarch, and designed to dissipate the yaw stress on the shortened chassis under braking.

The third significant change is the turntable. Wrights asked Humner to make it stiffer and more 'predictable' - "the bendy part of the bendy bus is not so bendy here," says Wright vice president of business development Mark Nodder. Both Volvo and Wrights agree that lots of these improvements will "wash through" the rest of their product ranges.

BODY ENGINEERING

Wrights and First know that all the good work would literally come apart at the seams if ftr banged, crashed and creaked like a normal bus. Sophisticated analysis tools, and sound deadening material, have helped even out noise, vibration and harshness (NVH) levels, all of which adds up to a small weight gain.

The engineers are anxious to point out that this extra weight includes all the integrated features like the air conditioning units and the substantial ticket machine. "Each gram has been analysed to see if it is worth it," says development engineer David Barnett. Around 85% of the material content of the ftr is made of easily recyclable metals and plastics.

DESIGNER

The ftr is the work of Paul Blair, Wrights' chief designer. He graduated from Coventry University in 1996 and after a few years contract work, joined Wrights in 1999. He worked alongside Trevor Erskine, his predecessor, for two years, developing the B7LA bendy-bus and the Eclipse double decker.

Wrights characteristic 'Nokia' front emerged at this time - a design theme also reflected in ftr - a result of the need to integrate the top and bottom windscreens on the decker.

Paul is pleased that their solution has become so associated with an acknowledged design icon, but denies the eponymous mobile phone was its inspiration.

The development of the ftr involved a lot of research. Paul and Mark McClurkin, Wrights ftr product manager, travelled extensively in Europe, looking at trains, trams and buses, and observing how they were used in practice.

After getting the greenlight early in 2004, the ftr project moved forward very quickly. The first concept was

> "Wrights claims the maximum noise heard in the noisiest area has been cut from over 85db to 79db in the ftr"

ready in autumn 2004, and the first prototype was unveiled in March 2005 by Alistair Darling. Apparently, ftr is very similar to the first 'fantasy' sketches Paul did in the very early stages.

Paul has worked on his own since Trevor Erskine retired, but has now been joined by a recent automotive design graduate.

NOISE

Moving the radiator to the roof - now surrounded by two decoupled skins filled with noise insulation - and swathing the engine in the same is also designed to help cut noise levels, as are micro-perforations in the ceiling, backed by more sound deadening material. Wrights claims that the maximum noise heard in the noisiest area - mid-turntable - has been cut from over 85db in the B7LA, to 79db in the ftr.

RIDE

Before starting on the ftr project, Wrights were already experimenting with damper characteristics on articulated vehicles. With Koni and Volvo it tested an adapted B7LA, concentrating particularly on the mid-axle.

Top left: A worker puts the finishing touches to ftr's 'Nokia' style front. Top right: the sleek curves of the exterior are reflected in the interior. Above, the rear lounge is designed with groups in mind

New CAD software - Pro-Engineer and Alias Studio Tools - and finite element analysis have allowed a more efficient and rigid body structure, which also helps ride quality. The two combine says Wrights to produce a "dramatically different" ride, with 33% of the harshest vibrations at the mid-axle - compared with the B7LA - now being transferred through the vehicle structure. The new design software has also resulted in improved fit and finish.

ON THE ROAD

ftr is noticeably quieter and smoother than a normal bendy-bus, at least in the front compartment. There were absolutely no squeaks or rattles. There is clearly more between you and the road than a sheet of steel, a spring and a tyre, although I would not say it glided, at least not on the roads around Ballymena. Despite some fairly tight turning manoeuvres, the turntable was absolutely quiet.

The noise at the back was not so impressive. Moving the radiator might have cut the noise levels, but you still had to raise your voice a bit in the rear compartment to be heard.

EXTERIOR

The purple and lavender launch livery is the work of Best Impressions' Ray Stenning. The interior and exterior colours were carefully coordinated, and went through many iterations and shades before settling on the final design.

The lighter swoop down the side is designed to make the most of the extra deep side tinted and double glazed side windows - made possible by a new cant rail design. The sophisticated heating, ventilation and air conditioning system means the ftr can do without opening windows, giving a totally flush prospect down the sides.

The ftr is 18.7m long, 700mm longer than a conventional bendy bus. The extra length comes at the rear where the designer has extended it a little to incorporate a curved back. Ftr is 2.5m wide, and 3.3m high to incorporate the air conditioning and radiator units. Wrights say the extra height over normal single deckers is also a design feature, giving the ftr extra presence on the road.

INTERIOR

Does the bubble burst as soon as you step inside? A qualified no - ftr is clearly a bus on the inside, there is no ›

revolution in seating, and the stop bell is just that, a regular tinny bell, not a bleeper or a buzzer.

Having said that, there are some major differences over standard buses, and some upmarket details that set the ftr apart. The 'lounge' at the very back, a circular seating area featuring some very nifty corner seats, is one of the four seating and standing 'zones' designed to create different environments for the variety of users. Those needing personal space can sit up front, while groups can 'hang out' in the back.

Sitting in the front section, squared off from the driver, and with an uncluttered entrance, gives the definite tram-like impression of sitting in a compartment. There are 37 conventional seats, five "super seats", 10 perch spaces, plus room for 61 standees, adding up to a total capacity of 113. The ftr is fully accessible - all stops will have Kassell kerbs - and has space for one wheelchair.

> "Wrights' factory in Ballymena has gone from making 180 vehicles a year in 1990 to 1,000 vehicles a year"

All the lighting is concealed, except for some LED spotlights.

MANUFACTURING

Wrights' factory in Ballymena, just over half an hour by car from Belfast, has gone from making 180 vehicles a year in 1990 to 1,000 vehicles a year now. The open plan factory has seven production lines - three each for double and single deckers, and now one for StreetCar/ftr. Wrights was awarded a multi-million pound government grant last year to help towards its expansion.

The ftr chassis arrive from Sweden already cut down. Wrights then unbolt the front module and weld the space frame on. The radiator is detached and placed in a specially developed cradle until the roof is attached later in the manufacturing process. The vehicle now proceeds down the production line like any other Wrights vehicle.

The factory has recently added its own composite department, employing around 60 men to make its own composite components, like GRP body panels and mouldings.

COSTS

Depending on specification, ftrs cost around £300,000 each. The telematics systems - real time info, ticketing, CCTV - are scalable, and the seat configuration can be altered.

Maintenance of the ftr is designed to be "affordable", with whole life costs said to be competitive over 15 years, including two refurbishments.

DRIVER

Another important element in the tram-like experience is the driver's, or pilot's, cockpit. Offering the look, space and unimpeded view of a train or a tram, the full-width cockpit is sealed off from passengers, although the pilot has twin screens able to show CCTV footage, and there is an intercom system. The pilot is also in radio contact with the ftr control centre at Monument, York, and has a separate air conditioning system.

TICKETING

Passengers are able to pay on the ftr, but they are encouraged to buy tickets before boarding to minimise dwelling time. Pre-set fare buttons and a very simple fare structure speed up the buying process, and the ticket machine - situated right in front of the entrance - does not give change.

> "Passengers are able to pay on the ftr, but they are encouraged to buy tickets before boarding"

York

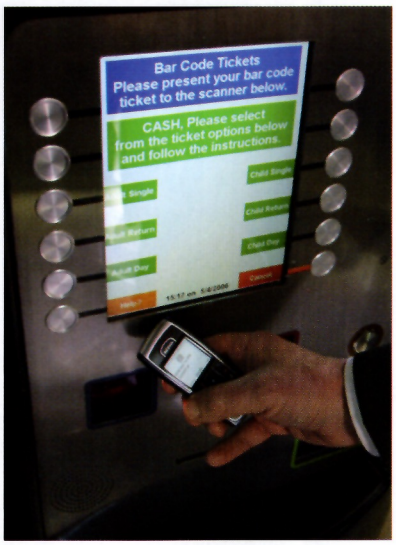
A vital link in the chain has been getting a local authority on board, and ftr seems to have lucked in with York City Council.

Described by officials as the pet project of the Liberal Democrat council leader, the council has certainly committed itself to the project. It will spend £1m this year on supporting the service through infrastructure improvements like traffic light priority, replacing kerbs and smoothing out junctions. Further improvements are scheduled for phase two of the project, and it realises that an essential part of the project is to keep the infrastructure in good condition. A renewal programme has been built into the schedule.

The city has taken out Traffic Regulation Orders to remove on-street parking along the route to ensure unimpeded progress - and received a minimal number of complaints.

Despite First's investment of £3.3m in vehicles, the York scheme is described as a pilot. In fact, all three of the first schemes will officially be pilots.

York's commitment to improving its environment is not in doubt. Traffic levels have been maintained at their 1999 level, and it recently flirted with the idea of a Low Emission Zone.


Bar Code Tickets
Please present your bar code ticket to the scanner below.
CASH. Please select from the ticket options below and follow the instructions.

Left: the driver's cockpit is sealed off from the passengers. Right: the on-board ticket machine uses mobile phone technology

William Wright

Mark Nodder

David Barnett

There are two ways to pre-pay. There are 50 PayPoints around the city, in supermarkets and convenience stores. The more adventurous can get their tickets sent direct to their mobile phones. First say it's a barcode, but actually it is like one of those black and white security diagrams you get with a PIN number slip from the bank. The user passes it over the scanner to deduct the fare. Currently only 'ftr10journey' tickets, a 12-for-10 offer are available. All pre-paid tickets are also validated by the ticket machine.

ELECTRONICS

The CCTV, air con, ticketing, real-time passenger information, automatic vehicle locator system and satellite navigation are totally integrated. The system is monitored by the Wrights Telematics system, a technology partnership between Wrightbus, ACIS (telematics) and Mobimatics (ticketing). The ftr has eight CCTV cameras, two air conditioning units, and two internal passenger information screens.

FTR's future

After Euro IV, the next thing on ftr's agenda is a hybrid engine. Mark Nodder said: "StreetCar will fully come of age when it has hybrid power."

Quite whose hybrid solution it will use is not clear – Wrights has its own technology, as used in the Electrocity (see News page 6), while Volvo announced the debut of its new hybrid power train last month.

According to Wrights executives, the Volvo chassis will not allow three or four door variants, both of which are in the business plan. Wrights and First are getting a lot of the credit, but Volvo has played its part too, shortening the chassis and having input into the modified turntable and the ride and handling. Wrights is at pains to emphasise the strength of the relationship between the two companies, even though ultimately the use of an alternative chassis seems inevitable.

Even if it all goes horribly wrong in the UK and the public do not take to the concept at all, Wrights should still find a market for the ftr – or StreetCar as it would then be called – abroad. In fact, Mark Nodder says the company, and Volvo, are actively exploring opportunities in Europe at the moment and should be making an announcement in the next few months.

Even if that does not work out, the Wrights are also looking to sell StreetCar in America, where they have a presence already, and the concept of Bus Rapid Transit is well established.

First has committed to buying the first 100 ftrs, eleven of which are currently in build for York. The remaining 29 of the initial Euro III batch of 40 are due to be completed by the end of 2006.

Leeds will be the next city to adopt the ftr concept, which should be in service before the end of 2006. There is apparently some jostling to be next in the queue – Glasgow, Manchester, Swansea and Worcester have all expressed a serious interest in ftr.

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GRAYSONS UP FOR AWARDS HAT TRICK

Grayson Thermal Engineering is in the running for three major awards.

Already named as Business of the Year by the *Birmingham Post*, the company has been nominated for the Business of the Year and Small Business of the Year titles by the Birmingham Chamber of Commerce and is a finalist in the technology and innovation section.

Grayson is based in Tyseley, employs 125 staff and has a turnover of around £10.5m. It specialises in cooling packs and heating systems for commercial vehicles and is also the UK's Thermo King agent for HVAC and air conditioning systems on buses and coaches. It recently designed the air con systems for the ADL Enviro500 deckers exported to Las Vegas.

■ *www.graysonquality.co.uk*
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INSET SIGNAGE ENHANCES POLYFLOR

Polyflor Voyager anti-slip transport floor covering is now available with inset signage, including 'Welcome Aboard' notices, wheelchair and buggy bay indicators. The material can incorporate a wide range of signage or corporate logos which are etched into the surface via a computer-controlled water jet cutting system.

The service was employed last year on 20 vehicles supplied to Go-Ahead's Brighton & Hove subsidiary by East Lancs Coachbuilders and will also be used on a further six vehicles this year. The buses make use of a variety of shades to provide an attractive, safe and easy to clean floor which meets the full demands of designers, builders, operators and legislators.

Voyager WS is one of four distinct product groups available from Polyflor and comes in seven multi-coloured chip or traditional colours. It incorporates Supratec – a soil-releasing polymer making it easy to clean – and anti-microbial agents for improved hygiene. Sheets can be welded together to provide an impervious surface and coved at the edges to form continuous skirting for full wash-through capability.

Polyflor materials comply with the fire retardant standard 95/28/EC, recommended by the Vehicle Certification Agency, ISO 3795, DiPTAC accessibility specifications and European EN 13845 non-slip standards. Flooring can be tailored to individual requirements and supplied in pre-cut form.

■ *www.voyager.polyflor.com*
Call 0161 767 1111,
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TRUEFORM INVESTS IN BUS INFRASTRUCTURE'S FUTURE

London-based Trueform, the specialist developer of intelligent transport solutions, has just completed a £1.6m investment at its Hayes factory.

New CAD-enabled design facilities and 3D flying optic laser cutting and forming machines have significantly upgraded production capability and are expected to allow the creation of an additional 50 jobs, mainly in design engineering and electronics for building Trueform's real-time journey planning displays, CCTV and solar-lit stops, shelters and interactive customer kiosks. Production capability has been extended by an estimated 70%.

Upgrading at the Hayes plant also includes the creation of 100,000 square feet of manufacturing and warehouse space. Additional investment has also been made in vehicles and equipment for maintenance and support teams across the UK.

■ *www.trueform.co.uk*

HEAVY DUTY 24V LAMPS: HIGHER SAFETY, LOWER COST

Electronics giant Philips says operators can increase the safety of their drivers and passengers at the same time as reducing costs by fitting heavy duty 24v headlamp bulbs.

Philips says in countries where legislation has demanded the use of daytime running lights (DRL) there have been noticeable reductions in accidents, particularly in multiple pile-ups. The company feels this legislation could extend to the UK and points out that operators travelling abroad where this legislation already exists are noticing the additional cost in replacement headlamp bulbs.

To counter the problem, Philips has developed a 24v HeavyDuty LongerLife range said to last between two and four times longer than conventional bulbs. The new bulbs have a high resistance to vibration and the company calculates cost savings will amount to around 42%.

Additionally, the new bulbs are manufactured using UV-blocking quartz glass which generates more light and will continue to operate normally if the headlamp glass is broken and the bulb exposed to water.

Philips UK sales manager Ed Savage said: "Coach operators will be able to see the benefits of using OEM quality bulbs when replacing headlamp bulbs, rather than cheaper, imported variants. Additionally, the safety of passengers is not compromised due to the failure of these cheaper alternatives.

"All Philips bulbs are of OEM quality and tested in severe conditions to ensure their robustness. The cost benefits can be considerable when compared to using cheaper alternatives and our website has a Cost Savings Calculator showing the savings that can be made by choosing the HeavyDuty LongerLife bulb."

■ ***www.regalautobulbs.co.uk www.philips.com/automotive***
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1991 H REG DENNIS DOMINATOR
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1989 F REG LEYLAND OLYMPIANS
Cummins L10/ZF, Northern Counties semi low height body, 75 seats, large choice

1992 J REG VOLVO
B10M automatic, Van Hool Alizee body, retrimmed, new belts, air-con, toilet, 49 seats, DVD , new test, only one available.

1997 P REG DAF SB3000
Automatics, straight 53 seaters, air-con, new tests, Ikarus bodies

1990 DENNIS DART,
Cummins/Allison, Carlyle body fitted with Plaxton Pointer front, 28 seats.

1983 LEYLAND TIGERS
Rebodied with East Lancs EL2000 bodies, 55 seaters

1992-94 LEYLAND OLYMPIANS
Cummins L10/ZF, Alexander R type bodies, either 74 seat dual door or 78 single door, large choice

1994/7 N/R REG MCW METRORIDER ,
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1987 E REG LEYLAND OLYMPIANS
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1999 PP IVECO EURO MIDI
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1989 PP DENNIS CONDORS
Gardner/Voith, Duple Metsec bodies, 2 door, 106 seaters

1993 K REG DENNIS DART,
Cummins/Allison, 40 seater, Wrights bodies

1997 P REG VOLVO OLYMPIANS,
Alexander bodies, 2 doors, 68 seats, or can be single doored and upseated to 78

1995 M REG VOLVO OLYMPIAN,
Volvo/Voith, Alexander body, 82 seats , new test.

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Arriving now from Hong Kong. Cummins L10 engines, Voith 3 speed auto gearboxes, tinted windows, full air-con throughout, 94 seats with 2 doors or 95 with single door conversion. Refurbished to Firstgroup spec 4 years ago. Limited number available.

1989 G REG LEYLAND OLYMPIANS
Cummins L10/ZF, Northern Counties body, 2 doors, 75 seats

1988 LEYLAND TIGER
Repowered with Volvo THD engine, Plaxton 3500, 51 seats, toilet, good condition, private plate

1986/7 LEYLAND OLYMPIANS
Gardner/hydracyclic, ECW semi-low height bodies, 68 seats, long tests, some single door, 72 seaters also available, from £7000

1988 F REG LEYLAND TIGER
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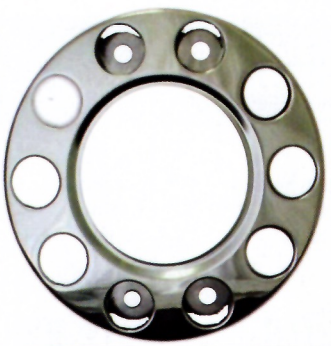

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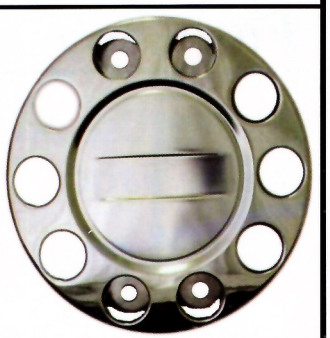

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Empty lane

We're all for bus lanes and councils should be praised for installing them in cities and towns the length of Britain.

However, if you're putting a bus lanes in, there's one key ingredient you need to make it work... a bus.

Unfortunately, it seems Bracknell Forest Borough Council in Berkshire has overlooked this tiny matter, by putting in a bus lane on a route no longer used by the local First services.

Having spent tens of thousands of pounds of council taxpayers' money on pointlessly redesignating the lane in Crowthorne Road, Wildrings, councillors are now planning on adding a new one - hopefully on a bus route this time.

Bus lanes tend to need buses if they are to actually make a difference...

Very unorthodox...

An MP wants to know the reason why. A Greek Orthodox Archbishop definitely wants to know the reason why - and even the Archbishop of Canterbury may want to know why!

It's all to do with a green bus shelter that Leicester City Council has erected smack bang across the entrance to a Greek Orthodox church. Pallbearers are appalled at having to manoeuvre around it, and brides are blushing at having it full frame in their wedding photos.

Local MP Sir Peter Soulsby is writing a protest letter to the council, while Archbishop Thyateira Gregorios says he may take up the issue with the Archbishop of Canterbury.

The city council's solution? "We're going to paint it black," said a spokesman.

Running coach

When training for a marathon, it's not unusual to be joined on your runs by a coach - but one Kent man has got the wrong end of the stick.

Headteacher Carl Fitter, of All Saints Primary School in Wouldham, is training for the London Marathon by racing the school coach back from its weekly five-mile trip to the swimming pool.

Fitter says the coach spurs him on to go faster, even though he has only beaten it a couple of times.

Googled...

http://freespace.virgin.net/ian.smith/buses/index.htm

Ian Smith is a man who loves his buses. His website, Ian's Bus Stop, is described as an outsider's view of London Transport buses, mainly in the 1930-1980 era and contains oodles of photographs, drawings and technical information on bygone buses. The site is updated on an almost weekly basis and also contains event reviews and links to the websites of fellow enthusiasts. It's not the prettiest site you'll ever visit, but Ian's passion really comes through.

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Two minute interview

Full name Stuart Henry
Age 26
Occupation Divisional corporate affairs manager, National Express UK Bus Division

Will there be more passengers on coaches and buses in the future? If the huge investment in new vehicles and infrastructure continues in the UK, then yes, there are fantastic opportunities for growth.

Who will they be? I'd like to think that the business commuter could be attracted by a strong, reliable, well marketed and clean bus service. We must recognise as well, however, that local children are very much tomorrow's customers.

Give the industry's business managers 20 words of helpful advice... Be honest with others. Be clear, committed, conscious and most of all, endeavour to communicate with everyone across the business.

Which vehicle – coach, bus, motorcycle or car – do you love the most, and why? Well I have to admit that I'm a BMW fanatic. Its that quality of their cars, both the latest models and those from 20 years ago. The new BMW M6 is pretty special.

If you asked your best friend or partner, what would they say is your worst attribute? My wife Lorraine knows too many! But I would say it's that I talk over her favourite TV programmes, like Friends and Will and Grace.

At your ideal dinner party, what would be the main course? I'm a big meat eater so any chicken dish or fillet steak.

And in your glass? We're into Spanish red wine at the moment. Other times I like a nice cold 'Paul Weller' (aka Stella) which my local landlord serves so well!

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Y REG 2001 VOLKSWAGEN TRANSPORTER

2.5TDI AUTOMATIC, POWERED STEERING, MWB, SIDE LOADING DOOR, 5 SEATS PLUS 1 WHEELCHAIR, UNWIN TRACKING, WITH SIDE MOUNTED RICON TAIL LIFT,ONE OWNER, MINT CONDITION, 33,000 MILES

X REG 2001 FORD TRANSIT 2.5 TD

MANUAL,CHASSIS DEVELOPMENT COACHBUILT BODY, PAS, 12 REMOVABLE HIGH BACK SEAT'S,UNWIN TRACKING, RICON TAIL LIFT, POWER DOOR FRONT ENTRY,ONE OWNER, EX LOCAL AUTHORITY, 63,000 MILES ONE REMAINING

2000 V REG PEUGEOT BOXER

2.5 DIESEL, 5 SPEED, PAS, L W B, EXCEL CONVERSION SIDE LOADING DOOR WITH STEP, 12 SEMI HIGH BACK SEATS , UNWIN TRACKING, RICON TAIL LIFT, V GOOD CONDITION, ONE OWNER

2001 51 REG RENAULT MASTER

MM33, 2.2 DCI ,5 SPEED ,PAS, MWB, O & H CONVERSION SIDE LOADING DOOR WITH AVS STEP, 7 SEATS PLUS 2 WHEELCHAIR SPACES, RICON TAIL LIFT, UNWIN TRACKING, MINT CONDITION ONE OWNER, LOW MILES,

2001 Y REG RENAULT MASTER

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T REG IVECO 59.12

2.8 DIESEL TURBO, MELLOR COACHBUILT BODY, P A S, 16 REMOVABLE SEMI HIGH BACK SEAT'S,UNWIN TRACKING, PLS FULLY AUTOMATIC TAIL LIFT, FRONT ENTRY,ONE OWNER, EX LOCAL AUTHORITY, LOW MILES 66,000 KMS

V REG VOLKSWAGEN LT46

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52 REG 2003 RENAULT MASTER

LM35, 2.5, 5 SPEED, PAS, LONG WHEEL BASE, MELLOR CONVERSION SIDE LOADING DOOR WITH STEP, 16 HIGH BACK M2 TESTED SEATS PLUS DRIVER, MINT CONDITION, ONE OWNER, 6,000 MILES,

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MM33, 2.2 DCI ,5 SPEED ,PAS, MWB, O & H CONVERSION SIDE LOADING DOOR WITH AVS STEP,11 SEATS OR 6 PLUS 2 WHEELCHAIR SPACES, RICON TAIL LIFT, UNWIN TRACKING, MINT CONDITION ONE OWNER, VERY LOW MILES,

04+54 REG RENAULT MASTER T35

2.5, 5 SPEED,PAS, LWB, MELLOR CONVERSION, SIDE LOADING DOOR WITH AVS STEP, 14 SEATS OR 10 PLUS 2 WHEEL CHAIRS, UNWIN TRACKING, RICON TAIL LIFT, MINT CONDITION, LOW MILEAGE.

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2.5 TURBO DIESEL 109 BHP, PAS, LUXURY SPEC FRANK GUY CONVERSION, TWIN SLD'S, TINTED WINDOWS, 10 HIGH BACK SEATS,OVER HEAD LOCKERS, WITH AIR & LAMPS REAR STORAGE AREA, EBERSPACHER CLIMATE CONTROL, EX DEMO 16,000 MILES

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